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GOBLIN SLAYER

KUMO KAGYU

Illustration by
NOBORU KANNATUKI

GOBLIN SLAYER
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"That doesn't count as consulting us!"
"No, it doesn't!"
"Doesn't it?"

"Welcome to the Temple of Law."
The archbishop beloved by the Supreme God. The Gold-ranked adventurer who, ten years ago, struck down a Demon Lord.
"We've come to slay the goblins."

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"Oh! Uh!
Oh… Uhh…
Did you see anything?"

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Volume 2

KUMO KAGYU

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YEN ON
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GOBLIN SLAYER
KUMO KAGYU

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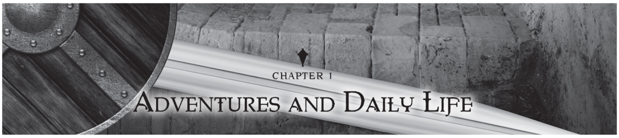
Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Unto eternity her name shall shine
Sword Maiden, beloved of the Supreme One
A saint, one of the six Golds
In her hands, the scales of justice
And the sword of power

Because word-havers far and near adore her
Her prayers shall call
Divine miracles forth
And she shall fight alongside six Golds
To quell the Demon Gods

This duty discharged, she shall
Become the keeper of the law
Unto eternity her name shall shine
Sword Maiden, beloved of the Supreme One…



CHAPTER 1

Adventures and Daily Life

"If you don't like it, you can go home."

A clear voice rang out in the forest, which stood dark even at noon.

Trees, moss, ivy. This was a world where one trod on the bones of derelict chalkstone buildings, a place ruled by plants so profuse they ran all together. The ruins of a great city, perhaps built in the Age of the Gods—or at least in the first age of those who have words.

Even the elves reputedly acknowledge that no thing endures under the weight of months and years, and yet…

This scene was especially sad. Cracks ran roughshod over elaborate carvings; stone floors once flush now lay shattered. Through the branches that stretched overhead like a ceiling, a thin, dappled light, not enough to see by, seeped in. This place had been a city once—but now it was nothing, a ruin. Only the trees and plants lived here now.

Through this landscape marched five figures in single file, loaded with every imaginable item. They were, of course, adventurers.

The voice belonged to the young woman at their head, charged with scouting. Her long ears, the proof that she was a high elf, quivered.

"It doesn't mean anything if you force it."

"What doesn't?" The response was curt, the voice almost mechanical.

It came from the second in line—a human warrior in a dirty helmet and leather armor. At his hip was a sword that seemed a strange length; on his arm was a small, round shield; and by his waist hung a bag filled with all odds and ends.

It was slightly better equipment than the latest starry-eyed youth from the country might have. But only just. He didn't look like much. Yet his footsteps, the way he carried himself, radiated assurance.

As warriors go, he would have made a strange impression on anyone watching.

“This adventure!” High Elf Archer didn’t turn around. Her long ears flitted up and down restlessly.

Many elves were born rangers. They were scouts on a par with rheas, even if it wasn’t their main class.

She jumped over a protruding tree root with such ease that she seemed to weigh nothing at all.

“I don’t *not* like it,” the warrior said.

High Elf Archer’s ears jumped.

“This was what we agreed. I will not refuse to pay what I owe,” he continued.

Her ears drooped again.

The third person in line sighed at the man’s words.

Small, young, inexperienced, and the most beautiful in the group—a human girl. She gripped a sounding staff with both hands and wore the clergy’s vestments over her chain mail. She was a priestess.

She shook a reproving finger at the warrior, as if to say, *It can’t be helped.*

“Now, that won’t do. You need a better attitude.”

“…Do I?”

“Yes, you do. Just when she’s being so thoughtful of you and all!”

“Is that so…?” the warrior murmured, then went quiet. His expression was hidden behind his helmet. A short deliberation later, he turned his grim visor toward the elf and asked her directly, “Is it true?”

“Could you *not* ask that?” High Elf Archer said, puffing out her cheeks.

In reality, ever since she had requested “an adventure” as her reward for helping the warrior defend a certain farm, the elf had been in quite a merry mood.

Whether she would admit as much aloud, though, was another question.

“Ahh, give it up!” A rotund dwarf stroked his beard, giving a sincere chuckle.

He was fourth in line, a magic user, dressed in an Eastern style

—Dwarf Shaman. He was even shorter than Priestess but built like a boulder. Conventional wisdom held that spell casters were weak, but dwarves were different.

Not that the brevity of his limbs was never a problem. Forging along animal trails was a particular hurdle for him.

“This is Beard-cutter here. Hardheadedness is nothing new with him.”

“…I guess so. Orcbolg is stubborn.” With that, High Elf Archer heaved a sigh. “Much as I hate to admit a dwarf is right about something.”

Dwarf Shaman gave an annoyed “hmph,” then smiled smugly. “How d’you expect to find a man with that kind of talk? You’ll be a two-thousand-year-old spinster!”

“Hrk!” Her ears jerked. “I don’t care. Why should I care? Anyway, I’m still young.”

“Oh, are you?” said Dwarf Shaman, his smile deepening as though he had found the opening he was looking for. “I should’ve known—judging by that anvil you’ve got for a chest!”

“This from a walking barrel!”

High Elf Archer’s lovely eyebrows bristled. She spun around and glared at the dwarf. Covering her rather flat chest with her arms, she opened her mouth to shoot back—

—but was interrupted by a hissing breath.

“The inhabitants of this land may have gone to the far side of time, but perhaps some decorum is warranted.”

The speaker was a lizardman with a talisman around his neck.

He was the tail—literally and figuratively, with his swishing behind him—of the formation. He was a giant, his breath wheezing out from his jaws. Wearing the traditional garments of his people and joining his hands in strange gestures, he was a lizard priest, who followed his forebears, the fearsome nagas.

“These lands are not the purview of people. Let caution abide, and do not invite trouble.”

“Hrm. Perhaps she was being a bit loud.”

“Hrk! What? It’s your fault for—”

“My dear ranger, please,” implored Lizard Priest.

The words *starting it* died on her lips.

Lizard Priest wasn’t the leader of the party, as such, but High Elf Archer didn’t have it in her to go against that imposing visage.

“Perhaps you could proceed. Climbing over that root looks apt to be a challenge."

"…Yes, sir."

"And dear spell caster, it will not do to distract our scout."

"I know, I know."

Dwarf Shaman didn't seem to notice how High Elf Archer's ears drooped under the withering reproof.

Meanwhile, Lizard Priest rolled his eyes in exasperation.

Priestess giggled, almost without meaning to. She liked how lively High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman got when they fought.

It's nice that they're friends enough to argue like that.

"Hyup!"

High Elf Archer vaulted over the tree root almost as tall as she was, in one, two, three steps, in an acrobatic display beyond what most people were capable of.

"You're practiced at that," the warrior, who had been watching, said quietly.

"Oh, you can tell?"

Along with High Elf Archer's satisfied answer, a climbing rope sailed back over the obstacle.

The warrior gave it two or three exploratory tugs, then planted his feet on the root and began to pull himself up.

He climbed with a speed and lightness that belied all the armor he was wearing. Maybe this was what came of a life in the outdoors.

"All right. This will do." From atop the root, his helmet turned as he looked down. "Next."

"Oh—right!"

Priestess nodded several times and followed him.

She transferred her staff to her back and began to climb uncertainly, leaning intently against the root to support herself.

"But… Hrgh… To think a city this big could turn to ruins… Yikes!"

"Be careful."

Vwoop. Priestess slipped on some moss and nearly fell, but the warrior grasped her wrist and pulled her up.

Her arm was so thin, it looked like the leather-gloved hand might break it in half.

"Th-thank you…," she said in a vanishingly small voice, looking down at the root and blushing.

She rubbed her slightly sore wrist. Not that she was complaining.

“If you’re not hurt, we’re going down.”

“Right.”

Priestess made her way over the root, the warrior holding her hand to support her.

Once they were safely on the ground, High Elf Archer cocked her head and asked, “Everything all right?”

“Yes… I just…need to build up my strength a bit more…”

“Well, don’t go crazy,” the elf said with a flick of her ears. She narrowed her eyes and gave Priestess a meaningful look up and down. “You wouldn’t want to end up built like a dwarf.”

“I can hear you, long-ears! And I keep telling you, I’m just average for a dwarf!” Dwarf Shaman shouted from the other side of the root. “Anyway, nothing can win against the flow of time. Not your trees, not our caves… Nothing.”

The dwarf, after a helpful push up onto the root from Lizard Priest, steadied his resolve and jumped to the ground.

He landed on his bottom with a thump.

High Elf Archer frowned openly at the inelegant display. “Could you *be* any more ridiculous?”

“Look at my legs! They’re stubby! You elves, always so worried about how people see you.”

“If it bothers you, you could always use Falling Control.”

“Pfah! Use a spell for this? Have the elves no concept of frugality in magic?”

“Now, now…” Priestess broke in between them with a smile she couldn’t quite suppress. “If you get too loud, you’ll be in for another scolding,” she warned.

“Oh, who’s going to scold me? From an elf’s perspective, that snake’s just some kid…”

“Oh-ho?”

High Elf Archer’s ears jumped at the low rumble of a voice.

“Even the elves are not eternal. Perhaps the only thing that is, is eternity itself…”

The voice was accompanied by the swish of Lizard Priest climbing the root with the aid of his claws and tail.

He climbed gracefully and landed nimbly. It was impressive, even if a bit loud. “Perhaps it would be amusing to discover whether the high elves are eternal or not?”

“…I’ll pass.”

Perhaps he had intended his expression to appear playful or teasing. But to anyone without scales, it only looked like a huge lizard with his toothy mouth wide open.

High Elf Archer frowned and shook her head from side to side.

"And?" the warrior said. "Where are the goblins?"

"…There he goes again." High Elf Archer gave a big shrug as though saying *It's not even worth responding* and followed up with an even bigger sigh. "I went out of my way to find ruins that seemed like they might have goblins in them, just for you, Orcbolg." *You could be a* little *grateful.*

At that, the warrior continued with, "Hmm. In other words, you were being considerate."

"…Yeah, you could call it that."

"I see."

He had apparently been waiting for everyone to arrive. Now he gave a single nod and set off at the head of the column. High Elf Archer hurriedly followed after, overtaking him to resume reconnaissance.

All things considered, the warrior was a pretty good scout himself. Despite his quick, nonchalant, almost boisterous-looking gait, his armor was strangely silent. He might seem a simple brigand, but he stepped on not a branch, kicked not a stone.

"Ahem, no need to fret so, milord Goblin Slayer." Lizard Priest pulled some rolled paper from his bag and opened it, studying it even as he walked.

It was faded, worn, seemingly half gone, but it appeared to be a map of the city they were in.

Taking care not to damage the paper, Lizard Priest ran a claw along it thoughtfully. "…There should be a shrine farther in. I, for my part, believe we should go there. What do the rest of you think?"

"Agreed," the warrior said readily. He had stopped in his tracks and was feeling out the street—once flagstone—with a finger, looking for footprints. "There may be goblins here."

"Is that *all* you ever think about?!" High Elf Archer said wearily.

"Is there anything else?"

"Look around!" she said, not dropping her guard, but spreading her arms wide. "Look at this! Wonder! Secrets! Mystery! Legend! Don't you feel any of it?"

“There isn’t time for that.”

“…I can’t believe you.”

“Is that so?”

High Elf Archer pursed her lips at the terse answer. Her long ears flicked.

“Now, long-ears. If you rush the polishing of a stone, you’ll only break it.” Dwarf Shaman laughed, twirling his beard, at the petulant elf. “Just give it time. Gods, all you elves are so impatient.”

“That’s why you’re all so fat, dwarf—just eating and drinking, never *doing* anything.”

“Aww, what’ve you got against a little food and drink? You could stand to put on a bit yourself!” He took a long swig from the jug of fire wine on his belt, apparently unperturbed by her comment. “Though t’be fair, my long-eared lass, you’re not wrong.”

High Elf Archer gave Dwarf Shaman a look as he let out an altogether indelicate burp.

“Beard-cutter, have y’never thought it might go easier if you were to, say, move up in the world?”

“I have,” the warrior answered shortly as he crouched low, drew up to a wall, and peered around a corner.

“Oh-ho.” The dwarf let out a grunt at the unexpected answer.

The warrior looked left, then right, then continued on ahead. “To build my reputation, become Gold-ranked, and take wider work as an adventurer is one possibility,” he said.

“Then why’ve you not done so?” the dwarf asked.

“Because if I did, goblins would be attacking villages.”

Keeping watch next to them, High Elf Archer shook her head as if to clear away a headache.

“I’d heard humans could get tunnel vision, but…are they all this way?”

“I think he’s special,” Priestess said with a *What can we do?* smile.

So it had gone in the months since they’d met—confusing though it had been at first.

“He talks about a lot more subjects than he used to, though.”

“……”

The warrior silently continued his search with that same brisk walk. Priestess followed him, still smiling. *I mean, look.*

“And he’s easy to understand, isn’t he?”

“I get that, at least,” High Elf Archer said with a nod and a chuckle.

Dwarf Shaman and Lizard Priest exchanged a glance, then a wordless smirk.

They shortly came to the end of what seemed to have once been a broad main street and arrived at their destination: a large square and a gaping clearing in the trees. They could just see a white-walled opening, like the entrance to a cave.

"Don't see any guards." The warrior heaved a sigh as he took stock of the territory from the long grass in the dim shadows of the trees.

Since entering the forest, they hadn't seen hide or hair of a wild animal, let alone any monsters.

"Oh, so…that means there aren't any goblins!" From the back of the line, Priestess tried to encourage the disappointed-sounding warrior.

"Not necessarily."

The answer was almost mechanical, but it didn't appear to bother her. She had the air of a baby chick as she trotted behind him.

"I don't believe they would let such a ready-made nest go to waste."

"You don't have to imagine they're here if they're not," High Elf Archer said, then muttered to herself, "Goblins, goblins. Honestly."

The warrior ignored her and said, "Or they may have only recently dug a tunnel from the nest to here."

"Hey… Do you smell something?" High Elf Archer frowned. She hadn't meant it as a response to the warrior.

Lizard Priest gave a slow shake of his head. "Sadly, my nose is of scant use in this forest. What kind of odor is it?"

"It's kind of…huh. Like…rotten eggs?"

"…So they are here," the warrior murmured shortly. At that, the adventurers each readied their weapons. High Elf Archer brought up her bow, a great yew branch strung with spider's silk, along with an arrow that had a bud for a tip.

With a prayer to his ancestors, Lizard Priest turned a fang into a polished sword.

Dwarf Shaman reached into a small bag of catalysts, while Priestess held her sounding staff in both hands.

They set out quickly, spreading out to surround the entrance.

"What should we do? Do you want to go in? Or should I use my

Protection miracle—?”

“No.” The warrior shook his head, cutting off Priestess’s anxious question. “Is there another entrance to these ruins—this shrine? What does the map say?”

“Not so far as I’ve seen,” replied Lizard Priest, who knew the map like the back of his hand. “Though, these being most ancient ruins, we cannot be sure collapse has not created one.”

“We’ll smoke them out, then.” With his shield-bearing left hand, the warrior dug in his bag.

What he drew out was yellowish and about the size of his palm; it looked like a hardened chunk of something. He used rope to tie the thing to a bit of waste kindling, until he had tightened them into a ball.

Priestess wore a slightly strained expression. Perhaps she remembered this thing.

“That’s—um…that’s pine resin, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And…sulfur.”

“It will make a good, thick smoke.” Even as he spoke, the warrior easily struck a flint, setting fire to the smoke bomb. Being careful not to breathe the fumes that immediately began rising from the device, he tossed it into the hole. “And it will poison the air. It’s unlikely to kill them, but…” With that, the warrior drew a smallish sword from its scabbard. “Now, we wait.”

The smog from the smoke bomb rolled deep into the ruins.

The adventurers sighed to one another with a mixture of annoyance and trepidation.

“You do know the most vile tricks,” said Dwarf Shaman.

“Do I?”

“You don’t see it?”

But there was no arguing with the immediate results. Small silhouettes came running through the wall of smoke, clamoring in shrill voices.

They were cruel-faced monsters about the size of children: goblins.

“Hmph.”

When he saw the goblins were wearing leather cuirasses, he hacked at them with his sword like an ax through firewood.

Impact. Scream. A spray of blood.

He casually stepped on a goblin who lay faceup, a sword buried in its skull, and took its weapon for his own.

A short sickle. The warrior gave the bloodstained weapon a light twirl, then nodded. *Not bad.* The weapon had been made for a goblin to wield in a cave, but it felt natural in his hand.

“Our quarry have excellent equipment. Be careful.”

“This isn’t like any adventure I’ve ever been on.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No!” High Elf Archer let off an arrow with a frown.

It was made of a branch naturally suitable for a bolt, and it flew as though the shrine itself were drawing it in.

Three screams went up.

“Don’t you usually go *inside* ruins to fight goblins?”

“I suppose that is the conventional method.”

Lizard Priest danced from one writhing goblin to the next, finishing each with his sword.

“If one would join milord Goblin Slayer on his hunt, preparations must be made for what is least expected.”

“If you say so…”

Priestess cast a doubtful glance toward the warrior.

He was burying the sickle, held in a reverse grip, in a goblin’s throat. He tore the monster’s windpipe as he ripped out his borrowed weapon; then he immediately hurled it through the air. The blade spun into the cloud of smoke, and a goblin scream could be heard. His movements were brutally workmanlike.

“Won’t be needin’ spells at this rate, I suppose,” Dwarf Shaman said, readying gems for his sling.

It was just a provision in case the front line broke; he was in fact quite at his leisure.

“No.”

Now the warrior took up the dagger of the goblin whose throat he had torn apart, shaking his head as he tested the edge.

A dark poison of some description was slathered along the blade. The warrior wiped the poison off on the goblin’s tunic, ignoring Priestess’s shiver.

“Save your magic for once we’re inside,” the warrior said to Dwarf Shaman, putting the dagger at his belt.

He appraised the entrance to the shrine. Goblin corpses littered the ground, but there was no sense that more were coming from inside.

Had they killed them all? Or had some escaped?

"They're tough…"

He pulled the sword from the body of the first goblin he had slain, wiping the viscera off the blade to refresh it. This would do.

He unhesitatingly slipped the sword back into its scabbard, then nodded. "Once the bad air clears up, we move."

"Once again, *not* the kind of adventure I'm used to," grumbled High Elf Archer.

"No?"

"Because it's *not* an adventure! This one doesn't count, okay?"

"All right."

That was all the warrior said as he headed into the shrine. The party followed him.

A human warrior and cleric, a high elf archer, a dwarf shaman, and a lizard priest.

The planets and stars had completed nearly half of their revolution since this unusual group came together.

It had not been long since yet another fight in the endless struggle with chaos and disorder had come to an end. They went to ruins and caves around the cities of the frontier, searching each in turn. Many were the fortresses, shrines, ruins, and caverns that had gone forgotten in the long struggle. Allies of chaos might find respite in these places and wait for their time to come. One must always be on guard—but not only for monsters.

The rulers of the land, who had bought enough time to resume their petty rivalries, left such business to those who lived in the wilderness.

It was nothing: Adventurers would finish their fights and return to their daily lives.

People became adventurers out of a curiosity about unknown lands. Their dream was to make their way in the world by slaying monsters and finding treasure. And if they could earn a reward on their way to doing so, so much the better.

The warrior here cared little where the goblins dwelt, be it a cave or an ancient ruin.

Orcbolg, Beard-cutter, Goblin Slayer—he went by many names. But even as he strode boldly into the cavern, he was not yet an adventurer.

"Find all the goblins. Kill them."

He was Goblin Slayer.

§

Evening. The sun was well past its zenith and would soon begin to sink.

The first one to notice his homecoming was the owner of the farm.

A little road ran to town beside the fields, now colored with sunset.

He walked slowly along it with his bold, nonchalant stride. As ever, he wore his grimy helmet and leather armor, his sword of a strange length, and his small round shield.

The owner had been out repairing a fence when he caught a whiff of rust and stood.

"…You're back," he said shortly.

He nodded, walking up to the owner. "Yes. I finished my work."

"I see…"

The owner shook his head at the other man's guileless manner and looked away from the helmet, which hid whatever the mysterious figure was thinking.

The owner had nothing to say to this person he had known—or thought he had known—since the man's youth.

In fact, the owner found it hard to deal with this man. He could understand the man, didn't want to dismiss him out of hand, but this was also not someone the owner wanted around.

"You know how many years it's been?" he murmured without knowing it.

When goblins attack your village, it is like a force of nature, like an act of the gods.

Then, the man had had only one choice: to run. But he had not only saved himself; he was now fighting back.

Was that not enough?

"Yes." *He* nodded as if he understood.

"Then don't overdo it… I pity that girl."

"…I will be careful," he answered, with a touch of hesitation.

This was what made him so difficult, the owner thought.

If he was a man who cared about nothing, the owner would not have needed to care about him.

Perhaps *he* sensed what was on the owner's mind, for he continued in his brusque voice. "I'm sorry. I would like to rent the stable.”

“…It’s the usual. Don’t fret the details, just do what you want.”

He seemed to bear this curt response without concern and merely went on past the owner.

Now on the farm proper, he went around behind the cattle barn. Past a mound of dry grass—just beyond. There was a stable so old it had been abandoned long ago.

Boards had been pounded into the walls and ceiling to patch the holes in them. It was a rough thing certainly, but it was the work of his hands, which he had done without complaint.

Cow Girl, the owner’s adopted daughter and *his* friend since boyhood, had insisted she would do it, but he felt that as the tenant, it only made sense that he should do the work.

“Oh!” Just as he went to open the door, a voice had sounded behind him with childish excitement. He turned and saw a young woman pointing at him—Cow Girl. She ran toward him, chest bouncing, waving her arms.

“Welcome home! Geez, you could at least tell me when you get back!”

“I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“It’s not disturbing me to say hello.”

“Isn’t it?” He nodded calmly; Cow Girl poked an index finger at him.

“No! So greet me properly!”

He said nothing for a moment, then nodded slowly. “…I’m home.”

“That’s better. Welcome home.” Cow Girl smiled, and her face was radiant as the sun.

“I heard you the first time.”

He opened the ill-fitting door with a creak and went into the stable.

Cow Girl followed him, squeezing through the door.

He stopped and turned his head, looking at the face of his old friend. “How is work…?”

“I’m kind of on break.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah!”

He didn’t seem especially interested. He tossed his bag on the floor; then he took a flint and set light to an old lantern hanging from a beam.

The stable floated into view, looking rather like a cave itself.

A mat was stretched on the ground, and the room was home to some narrow shelves and an assortment of mysterious loose change. Bottles, herbs, a strange weapon shaped like a broken cross, old books written in indecipherable letters, the head of some beast… and many more things whose nature Cow Girl couldn't begin to guess at.

She suspected even most adventurers would not be able to fathom what he did with many of those items.

"Be careful."

"Sure, right…"

He offered the words to her as she poked around the collection, then sat down heavily right in the middle of the floor. He took the sword from his hip and put it aside, sheath and all, then began noisily disassembling his armor.

Cow Girl knelt next to him, looking over his shoulders at his hands.

"Hey, whatcha doing?"

"Repairing the dings in my helmet, changing the hinges in my armor, mending my chain mail, sharpening my blade, and polishing the rim of my shield."

"The rest I get, but…the rim of your shield? What difference does that make?"

"At the right moment, it can help."

"Huh…"

His movements were diligent, dutiful. With a hammer, he worked off and replaced metal fittings, formed chain links of bent wire, and honed his sword and shield with a whetstone.

A weapon could be replaced with something taken from a goblin, but armor was a different matter. It was exceedingly unusual to see a goblin in a metal helm that might actually protect its life. And even if he did find one, he wouldn't have the time to remove his own helmet and put on another.

An unlucky hit on armor that was on its last legs had a very good chance of being fatal. That made this work his most important, his most lifesaving.

Cow Girl watched his every move with a squint and a smile that suggested she was enjoying herself.

"…You find this interesting?"

"I guess. I always like to see what you're up to." She giggled and thrust out her chest in a bit of theatrics. “And? How’d your adventure go?”

She drew up to him, eyes shining. There was a sweet smell of milk on her.

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In a supremely indifferent tone, he replied:

"There were goblins."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes," he replied briefly, still working. Then, he added, "Quite a few."

Cow Girl stared intently at his back, then…

"Yah!"

He let out a breath as he suddenly felt something heavy and soft on his back.

Cow Girl pressed up against him and mussed his hair.

His hands stilled; he turned to her with a suspicious look. "What is it?"

"Nothin'! Just want to congratulate you on a job well done," she said good-naturedly.

"I'd be careful if I were you."

"Aww, it's fine!"

"It is not fine."

"Anything interesting happen? What kind of place was it?"

He fell silent. Perhaps he felt nothing he could say would be of any use.

He mounted his newly polished shield on the wall, then went to ransack the shelves. He pulled out several bottles, a bag, and a mortar that came rolling down, then unsealed one bottle with gloved hands. Inside were the remains of a snake.

Ignoring Cow Girl as she muttered "ugh" from behind him, he put the snake in the mortar.

"Don't touch it. You'll get a rash."

"Sure… So, um…"

"It was ruins in a forest."

"Ruins… So, you went to slay goblins?"

"No." He shook his head. "…I was invited by others."

She nodded with a noise of interest, as he added the contents of one bottle after another to the mortar.

The snake, then a red powder—some sort of spice. Dried herbs. All irritants. He didn't even make exact measurements; the process was just that familiar to him. He crushed everything in the mortar until it was all mixed together.

"…It seems it was once a city of some kind."

"You don't know its name?"

"Sorry. I didn't care."

"Well, I guess there's plenty of them around here. This being the frontier and all."

Once he was satisfied that the snake was completely ground up, he began rooting through a nearby shelf.

He came up with an egg—the shell of one that came from the farm. They had chickens, but they didn't lay eggs every day.

He carefully poured the powdered contents of the mortar into the egg through a hole in its top. As he did, he murmured, "Come to think of it, there was a big…"

"Uh-huh?" Cowgirl said with a nod.

"A big tree root sticking out."

"How big is big?"

"About as tall as you. It was hard work to climb over."

"Huh. That's really something."

It was a childlike appraisal and, in its way, childlike wonder. She had lived most of her life on the farm, never going farther than the town; she had never seen such a thing. Now it was he who knew more of the world than her.

That left her a little sad but happy, too.

"And there were goblins," he added as he wrapped the filled egg in oil paper and sealed it. His tone was disinterested yet gravely serious. "…It was strange. They were unusually well-equipped."

Cow Girl tapped her chin thoughtfully before saying, "Hmm… Do you think they fled the battle here?"

"If so, they would have at least posted a guard."

"Hmm… Well, if you don't understand, I'm sure not going to figure it out."

She gave a groan, then stretched out both arms with an "ahhh" and rolled onto her back on the floor.

Near the dim ceiling, the lantern burned and crackled.

"You'll get dirty."

"I don't care," Cow Girl answered with a hearty laugh.

Then… "Hey," she said, rolling onto her other side to face him. "What if you took a break tomorrow?"

"No." He shook his head quietly as he tucked the egg into his bag. "Guild Girl called me in."

"Oh yeah? That's too bad."

He nodded. "It may be goblin slaying."

§

"No, it isn't goblin slayi—Wait, please don't leave!"

Goblin Slayer turned around in annoyance, his hand on the door of the meeting room.

There were luxurious chairs, a shaggy carpet. One wall was covered with the heads of monsters and magical beasts, along with old weapons.

Surrounded by the trophies of adventurers through the ages, the man replied:

"But you've already said it isn't about goblins."

"Yes, well, that's—that's true, but…" Guild Girl, looking small in one of the chairs, seemed like she might break into tears at any moment. Clinging to a sheaf of papers, she said in a small voice, "It…it really does have to be goblins with you, doesn't it?"

Goblin Slayer was silent. There was no guessing his expression under his helmet.

After a moment, he gave a quiet sigh.

Then he turned, walked quickly up to a chair, and sat down more aggressively than necessary. He looked at her sitting across from him and said:

"Be brief, please."

"Certainly!"

Guild Girl's face shined like a child's.

She quickly straightened her papers, arranging them once more on the tabletop. The sheepskin paper she spread out in front of him appeared to be the résumé of some adventurer. Name, race, gender, skills, and a quest history were all included.

"I'd like to ask you to be an observer, Mr. Goblin Slayer."

"An observer." He nodded as if already convinced. "Is this for a promotion test?"

Adventurers were divided into ten ranks, from Porcelain to Platinum.

Ranks were determined based on how much reward one had gained, how much good one had done the world, and one's personality. Some referred to these collectively as "experience points," and that wasn't inaccurate. It was, in effect, a simple measure of how much good one had done people and society.

But of course, there were those adventurers whose excellence stopped at their fighting skills. An adventurer's personality was valued at least as highly as his or her abilities. Thus, higher-ranked adventurers would serve as witnesses at a test—essentially, an interview.

In this way, for example, a vagabond with amazing skills from who knew where could rank Silver or Gold immediately. Or rather, such a storybook system was the ideal. But it didn't work out that way.

A male adventurer whose party members were all females, for example, would find it difficult to advance. Regardless of the circumstances, few people were willing to trust someone who looked like a philanderer with important quests. However strong they might be, fools whose strength was their only asset would remain Porcelain-ranked for life. Meanwhile, the best adventurers knew they were being watched and tried to act in a trustworthy manner.

…With the exception of a few of the historically extremely rare Platinums.

"But…" Goblin Slayer sounded uncertain. It was an unusual thing for him. "Are you sure I will do?"

Heavens. Guild Girl answered as if it didn't bother her at all. "What in the world do you mean? You're Silver-ranked, too, you know."

"The association decided that arbitrarily," Goblin Slayer said.

"That just shows how grateful everyone is to you."

Guild Girl sounded confident, as proud as if she were talking about herself.

Goblin Slayer fell silent. For a moment, he looked up at the ceiling, but before long he grabbed the paper.

"Who's being tested?"

Guild Girl gave a joyous nod the moment she realized he accepted, her braids bouncing.

"Th-thank you very much! It's several members of a single party, each moving from Steel to Sapphire, in other words from eighth to seventh rank…"

§

"Please let it be this time… Please, please let me advance this time…”

In the hallway outside the interview room, a prayer sounded among the waiting adventurers.

The speaker was a middle-aged man dressed in rags.

Probably a monk—well, not just any monk.

His body was shrunken with age. With him was a beaten wood staff, probably a kind of weapon. His forehead was shaven, but apparently he had no oil to put on it, and his pate was covered in thin hair.

“Shut it, Gramps! You don’t *have* to chant all the time just ’cause you’re a monk. You’re bugging the hell outta me!”

The critic was a young man with hard eyes who very much looked the part of a warrior.

His words were harsh, but he himself fidgeted as if unable to stay calm. Each time he did so, his well-used armor and battle-ax bumped into each other with a scrape of metal on metal. They weren’t rusted, but they had seen better days. Not top-quality equipment.

“Damn. I should’ve at least polished ’em…”

“Too late now. The old guy’s the only person here with his own house. Makes you want to get religion,” a young wizardish woman whispered placatingly to the man with the ax. “And a little polish wouldn’t have made much difference, anyway.”

Ever-so-slightly pointed ears peeked out from her torn hood—a half elf. Her spell book, which she paged through restlessly, looked well used, too. The cover was falling off and had been reattached with glue.

“Ahh, take it easy. Won’t do any good to get upset…”

The speaker then gave a belly laugh. He was a young man, short—indeed, barely half the size of anyone else there. He wore unblemished leather armor, a dagger at his hip, and fur-lined boots on his feet.

He was a rhea scout—or anyway, so one assumed.

“Yeah, I know,” said the ax-wielding warrior. “But there’s a big jump between Steel and Sapphire—in both pay and quests.”

“If we can advance today, we can finally stop hunting rats in the sewers,” the elf wizard added.

The warrior resumed, fast as a swinging ax, “We can finally do better than the interest on our debts. Gramps here will be able to keep himself. This is important.”

"I need this, too. Spell books are expensive. If a prayer is what it takes to get us that rank, I'll pray all day," the elf muttered philosophically. She glared at the rhea scout from under her hood. "Anyway, don't act like it doesn't concern you."

"Yeah, ha-ha-ha…" The rhea scratched his head in embarrassment. "I'm, y'know, I'm pretty scared of danger. And I don't have any debts, so…"

"You bum."

"Coward."

The warrior and the wizard sounded exasperated, but the scout only shrugged.

"Next, please!"

Guild Girl's cheerful voice floated out of the meeting room.

"Oh! That's me!" The rhea scout jumped up nimbly.

The bald-headed monk clung to his armor, practically on his knees. "Please… Pleeease be strong…"

"I know, I know, bug off," the scout said, brushing the monk's hand away. He opened the door…

"…Yikes."

…and his eyes went wide.

Three people sat in the meeting room. First, there was a guild employee, the bright-eyed receptionist. (One day he was going to spank her till she cried.) Second was another slim woman wearing the uniform of the guild. Who was this now? The rhea scout cocked his head. He couldn't quite recall if he'd seen her before. And then there was a higher-ranked adventurer—but a very strange-looking one.

Cheap-looking helmet. Grimy leather armor. Equipment barely suitable for an adventure. He didn't have his sword or shield, but there was no mistaking him.

"G-Goblin Slayer…"

"Is there any problem?" he asked.

"N-not at all, sir." The scout answered the brusque man with an obsequious laugh, reaching back to close the door.

The truth was, the rhea did not hate the man called Goblin Slayer, the man who had gotten to Silver rank by taking simple goblin jobs. The rhea wanted money. He wanted fame. He wanted to be well spoken of. But he hated being afraid, and he didn't want to die. He was confident Goblin Slayer must feel similarly. If he genuinely disliked anything about the man, it was that expressionless helmet…

Goblin Slayer watched the rhea scout sit down across from him.

The scout trembled slightly. He didn't hate Goblin Slayer, but he didn't find him easy to deal with, either.

"So, uh, this is it, huh? Advancement test." The rhea gave a weak laugh and rubbed his palms together. "Let's bust through Sapphire, past Emerald, Ruby… What do you say we go right to Copper?"

"I doubt we'll go quite that far," Guild Girl answered with a smile. She flipped through some papers in her hand. "I can't help noticing your brand-new armor and boots."

"Oh, you can tell?" The corners of the scout's lips turned upward, and he stuck his small feet out on top of the table. His boots were unscuffed, thoroughly polished, and so black light could hardly escape their surface. "They're pretty high-quality. I had them matted and everything. They're perfect for me."

"Really!"

He failed to sense what was coming.

"Why is it you're the only one to have done so well for yourself when all of you have taken on the same quests?" Her tone was terribly businesslike, ordinary. "Those are quite luxurious even in light of your party's aggregate reward. I hope there hasn't been a miscalculation."

Guild Girl bulled ahead, ignoring the way the rhea scout suddenly went stiff.

"Some rather ambiguous reports suggest that unlike your friends, you've been taking on quests on your own."

"Oh, that's, well, it's—"

The scout hurriedly pulled his feet off the table.

He looked right, left. There was nowhere to run. He spoke as quickly as he could think.

"Y-you know, I recently had a care package from home…"

"A lie."

The cutting words came from the employee who had remained silent until that moment.

The smile froze on the scout's face, but inside he cursed himself.

She wore the sword and scales around her neck, the symbol of the Supreme God.

"I swear on the name of the Supreme God. What he just said was a lie."

The Sense Lie miracle. Damn these seers!

That’s why he hadn’t recognized her. She was an inspector—a guild employee, but also a priest of the Supreme God, ruler of law and justice.

What was this? Had they suspected him? But why?

Guild Girl made a show of flipping through her papers. *We know everything*, the action said.

“It looks like you got new equipment after that raid on those ruins the other day… Oh, I get it.”

With a smile and a giggle, she clapped her hands and nodded.

“You told the others you were going ahead to scout, found a treasure chest, kept the contents for yourself, and sold them!”

“Erk…”

That was exactly what he had done.

On dives in ruins, monsters and traps were many and lethal. It was only natural that the rhea scout volunteer to do reconnaissance and that his companions agree. He had entered the ruins delicately, explored several twists, and then…

He’d found a treasure chest.

It wasn’t booby-trapped, and picking the lock was easy. Inside were dozens of coins, ancient but gold. Empty treasure chests were not a rare thing. And there was still plenty of room in his pack.

“Y-you see, th-that was… I…”

He laughed awkwardly, scratched his head like a scolded child, and nodded. It would be most to his benefit simply to apologize, he decided.

“I’m…very sorry.”

“Well, this *does* make things difficult.” Guild Girl laughed.

It was all too obvious that her flipping through the pages was just for show.

She had already foreseen all of this. The guild had an inn and a bar, and they weren’t just for the benefit of lower-ranked adventurers. The flow of money never lied.

“It’s people like you who give rheas and scouts a bad name.” She shook her head in disgust. “Well, it is your first offense… I think demotion to Porcelain and being barred from adventuring in this town is appropriate.”

“W-wait a second! How is that fair?!” Without meaning to, the rhea found himself leaning over the table and shouting. “I nip one little treasure chest, and you’re going to chase me out?”

"Excuse me?" Guild Girl's tone was cold, and her exasperation was obvious—indeed, she was quite tired of him. "Just one treasure chest? Don't be dumb. You can't repair a broken trust with money."

And one who would betray others' trust had no right to be an adventurer.

Of course, being an adventurer meant fighting. No one asked about your history. There were uncouth people among the adventurers. There was no end of arguments—all the more important, then, that one be as sincere as possible. An adventurer who was not trustworthy was just a scoundrel.

And the guild dealt in trust and trustworthiness.

The rhea was capable enough to be promoted and had just been granted clemency because this was the first time. Did he not understand that?

"You are hereby demoted on grounds of falsifying a reward. If you wish to stay here, though, you may."

"Erk…"

The rhea scout was at a loss for words. He struggled to think of some way to turn this situation to his advantage.

Everyone does it. No. That wouldn't get him out of his punishment. Maybe if he said someone had threatened him, forced him to do it…

"It won't help to try anything funny."

She was right. The minister of the ruler of justice was watching him, eyes shining.

His only hope… He turned to his one escape, the person in the room most like him.

"C-come on, Goblin Slayer… I'm asking you, as a fellow adventurer…"

Beseeching eyes. Ingratiating smile. Rubbing his palms together in desperate supplication.

The adventurer, who had sat with his arms crossed silently throughout the entire scene, replied with a touch of annoyance, "Fellow?" His answer was point-blank. "I am an observer. Nothing more, nothing less."

"But you… You're an adventurer, too…"

"Yes, I am." Goblin Slayer looked down at the pleading rhea. "Just like the ones you tricked."

"…!"

The rhea scout turned bright red and glared at the two of them.

For a brief instant, he had a vision of himself drawing his dagger and leaping at Guild Girl.

It was just possible.

"……"

But he would have to go through Goblin Slayer, a warrior strong enough to solo goblin quests that normally demanded an entire party. How much chance did the rhea really have in a hand-to-hand struggle?

"……"

Feeling Goblin Slayer's gaze fixed on him from beneath that helmet, he swallowed heavily. He was as clever as any scout and certainly no fool.

"…You'll regret this."

His feelings flowed over into his parting words as he kicked back his chair and fled the room.

Guild Girl let out a breath as the door slammed shut. "Declined for promotion. Phew… That was terrifying…"

The smile perpetually pasted on Guild Girl's face finally came off, and she slumped in her seat. At the end, under the scout's glare, she had unconsciously begun to shake. She didn't know what might have happened had Goblin Slayer not been there.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Goblin Slayer."

She looked up at the steel helmet next to her, her braids hanging limply.

"No." Goblin Slayer shook his head quietly. "I didn't do anything."

"Hardly! I remember how bad it was back when I was doing the association's training course in the Capital."

Still slumping, Guild Girl gave a faint smile.

"All those lowlifes who couldn't open their mouths without making a lewd remark. Thought they'd pick me up just because I was pretty and young."

"There are far too many of them, aren't there? Especially in the Capital." The inspector gave a sigh of exasperation and gently stroked the sword and scales.

"We have to take on people like that all by ourselves, so…you know?" With a little nod, she put one hand on the desk and pushed herself upright. Her braids bobbed. "It really makes you feel so much better to have someone you trust as your observer!"

"Does it?"

"Yes, it does."

She always showed such confidence when talking about Goblin Slayer. He must have understood, because he quieted a little, then rose slowly from his seat.

"…If we're done here, I'm going back."

"Oh, sure. If you stop by the front desk, I'm sure they can get you your honorarium…"

"All right."

Goblin Slayer headed for the door with his bold, casual stride.

Seeing him there, Guild Girl suddenly found herself speaking up.

"U-um!"

Now she'd done it. She'd said it. Guild Girl felt a twinge of regret.

Goblin Slayer, his hand on the doorknob, turned slowly. "What is it?"

Guild Girl hesitated.

The courage that inspired her to call out had vanished as quickly as it had come. She opened her mouth, paused, then decided to say only what was appropriate.

"…Good work today."

"Sure," he said as he turned the knob. "You, too."

The door closed with a soft *clack*.

Guild Girl, left behind, stretched out on the table again.

"Phewww…"

The surface of the desk felt good against her cheek.

"Nice work." Her colleague, the inspector, patted Guild Girl on the back with a softening of her implacable expression.

"I'm afraid that guy will just do something else."

"Well, living adventurers are a precious resource. And he didn't do anything clearly illegal…" It would be much worse if he threw away the whole framework of adventuring and became a serious troublemaker. "There are certainly all kinds of adventurers, from Lawful Good to Chaotic Evil."

"As long as they are adventurers, they're allowed to make that choice… Anyway, nice work."

"Not at all. It's simply my duty as a priest of the Supreme God." The inspector smiled and waved away Guild Girl's gratitude, but she could only sigh again.

"And from the perspective of the God of Law, was what I did just now…right?"

"Many people misunderstand the God of Justice, even the writers of our pageants." The inspector cleared her throat with an "ahem," itself a rather theatrical gesture. "Justice is not to punish evil, but to make people aware of it."

Law was a tool and order a way of living well. Nothing more and nothing less. That was why the Supreme God did not hand down revelations. The intent was not that they follow the sacred word of God, but that they think for themselves and use their own judgment.

Guild Girl was still laid out gracelessly across the desk, her face turned listlessly toward her friend.

"What a nice thought."

"If you can put it into practice. I'm still nowhere near Sword Maiden."

"That's not a very fair comparison."

Sword Maiden.

Ten years had already passed since she had become a household name.

Guild Girl had been twelve or thirteen that year, when one of the Demon Lords had returned to life.

Sword Maiden was a legend from the time when humanity was fighting for its survival, longing for the advent of a hero, a Platinum-ranked adventurer.

A party of Gold ranks had made bold to challenge the Lord…

"And they succeeded. One of them was a humble servant of the Supreme God, Sword Maiden."

The inspector blushed slightly and sighed like a daydreaming girl. "I love her," she murmured. "Anyway, all I do is use Sense Lie. It's not hard. There's more work to do, right?"

"Plenty of promotion interviews to hold. And I have to fill out the paperwork to demote that guy…"

"You can do it, hang in there!" Guild Girl's friend pounded her on the back again, but it wasn't comforting.

Even so, it brought her back to herself a bit. "Right." She nodded and looked up.

"So." A teasing grin came over the inspector's face. "Was that that guy you like?"

"Oh, um…"

Was Sense Lie still in effect? Guild Girl looked up at the ceiling, but the Supreme God was silent. She couldn’t quite meet her friend’s gaze, but she nodded honestly.

“Y-yes, he is… So?”

“Hmm. Well, can’t say I blame you. You’ve always had a thing for the helpful ones, ever since the Capital.”

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"I was always looking for more of a, you know, stoic adventurer type."

She hadn't found one. At the time she had been disappointed, but now it seemed a blessing. They had met each other after Guild Girl had finished her training and been assigned to this town on the frontier. A newly registered adventurer had met a newly minted receptionist, and they had known each other ever since.

He had been completely focused on hunting goblins, ignoring everything else. For her, fed up with the leering swashbucklers in the Capital, he was a breath of fresh air.

"I admit, maybe this one's a little *too* stoic…"

It's great I can talk to him, but maybe he could at least ask me out for a meal or something… Nah.

Guild Girl shook her head.

Him inviting her out for a nice meal after an adventure?

She couldn't picture it. And she didn't have the courage to ask him herself yet. If only she could get a little…push.

"Well, you're happy, that's what's important… So, how long can you afford to shirk your work?"

"Good question. Time to quit daydreaming and get back to business."

She slowly sat up, composing herself. She straightened the papers on the desk. There was much to do: the report on the rhea scout and the promotion of the ax-wielding warrior, the elf wizard, and the bald monk.

She had been putting off a great deal of more quotidian work, too. Well, she would start with what was right in front of her. She took a pen resolutely in hand, opened the lid of her inkwell, and began to run the pen over the sheepskin paper…

"Hey."

"Yiiwhat?!"

Guild Girl was completely startled at the voice so near, and her pen skipped along the page.

As she tried to settle the pounding of her heart, she saw that expressionless steel helm. She hurried to straighten her hair and control her breathing and not spill the ink in the process. She also swore to get a little payback on the smirking inspector later.

"Wh-what is it, Mr. Goblin Slayer?"

"I think you know." His voice was as mechanical as ever, yet somehow cheerful. He held a quest paper in his hand.

Had he grabbed it from the bulletin board after he left? No, she didn't remember there being any quests available.

And that paper… Does it request him by name?

Who was it from? Where was it from? She didn't know, but it was a special form that had been delivered by post-horse from far away.

Apparently ignoring Guild Girl as she stared quizzically at the paper, he said shortly:

"Goblin slaying."

Guild Girl gave him a weak smile.

§

"The reward is one bag of gold pieces per person. Come or don't, it's your choice."

Somewhere in the guild tavern, Goblin Slayer was summing up.

It was barely noon, but some eager types had come out to drink, and the place was noisy.

Except for when they were fighting, adventurers naturally paid scant attention to the time of day. After a long time in some ruins or labyrinth, upon their return it might be night, it might be dawn; it didn't matter. Sometimes they went dungeon diving in the morning with the intent to return that night, but it turned out to be the night of the day after. Caravan escorts might leave at noon. For all kinds of reasons, the lights at the tavern never stopped burning.

Today, as ever, the tavern was raucous with adventurers eating lunch and trying themselves against the wine.

In contrast, Priestess had been massaging her temples for quite some time as she listened.

"Okay, I get it…I think."

"Do you?"

"Yes, mostly. I get that if I act this surprised every time you do something I don't expect, I'll never last."

Their other three companions were also seated at the round table. His party. Her friends.

High Elf Archer was nodding along with Priestess despite her air of exasperation.

Lizard Priest munched thoughtfully on some cheese, tail swaying slightly.

Dwarf Shaman grinned, busy sewing gemstones into the back of his vest.

"Listen," Priestess said as if she were lecturing a child at the Temple, shaking a shapely index finger at him, "I told you before. If we don't feel like we actually have a choice, it doesn't count as consulting us."

"But you do have a choice."

"To go or not go. That's a very narrow choice."

"Is it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Hmm."

Goblin Slayer cocked his head quizzically. Perhaps he understood, perhaps he didn't.

In the back of her mind, Priestess considered the possibility that he didn't actually have a thought in his head.

"If we say we won't join you, you'll just go by yourself anyway, right?" High Elf Archer said.

"Of course."

"Well, then, this really isn't a discussion," she said with a laugh.

"At least Beard-cutter has softened up enough to *try* to have a talk with us." Dwarf Shaman had finished sewing in the gems and examined them critically as they caught the light.

"Utterly delightful! Sweet as nectar! …Erm. Yes, it is a promising trend." Lizard Priest clucked his tongue as he spoke. Most of his cheese was gone.

"Well, we'll make our choice, then." Priestess took her sounding staff in both hands from where it had been leaning against the wall.

"Fine," Goblin Slayer said shortly.

Priestess sighed for the umpteenth time, closed her eyes, and said deliberately:

"I'm coming with you."

"……"

He went quiet at Priestess's graceful smile, then after a moment muttered, "I see."

"Well, you did come on my adventure the other day. Even though it ended up being goblin slaying."

High Elf Archer bobbed her ears up and down excitedly. Ever the impatient type, she was already checking her bow, making sure she had arrows, sliding her bag onto her shoulder, and standing. “Heh-heh,” she giggled, stuck out her little chest proudly, and winked. “I’ll help you again—in exchange for another adventure. That’s all right, isn’t it, Orcbolg?”

“Yes.” Goblin Slayer nodded. “That’s fine.”

“And no poison gas bombs this time!”

“Hrm…”

“It’s only fair,” she said, her finger in Goblin Slayer’s chest.

After a moment he muttered:

“But it’s so effective.”

“Don’t care. Also, no fire and no floods. Think of something else!”

“But…”

High Elf Archer was no longer listening.

“Forget it. When those big ears start fluttering like that, whatever you say is going to go into one and out the other,” Dwarf Shaman muttered, annoyed.

Lizard Priest narrowed his eyes gleefully and touched his nose with his tongue.

“Even the snakelike cleverness of milord Goblin Slayer is rendered moot in the face of such a barbarian.”

“…Nothing to be done, then.” With hardly an attempt at a comeback, Goblin Slayer went quiet.

If that was what High Elf Archer demanded to come with him, there was no questioning it.

He’s a pretty straightforward person, isn’t he? thought Priestess as she met High Elf Archer’s eyes with a soft smile. They nodded at each other.

“Very well, then…” Lizard Priest opened his jaws next. He mulled over his words carefully, as if to show how thoroughly he had considered them. “In that case, it seems you will need every spell caster you can get.”

“Hang on, Scaly,” Dwarf Shaman said reprovingly, stroking his hair. “By that logic, oughtn’t I to come along, too?”

“Oh-ho, how impolite of me.” Lizard Priest rolled his great eyes in his head.

Dwarf Shaman gave him a friendly elbow. “Gods, you lot have backed me into a nice corner. I can hardly refuse now, can I?” Exasperatedly repeating, “Gods,” Dwarf Shaman set aside his needlework and began putting his tools away.

It wasn't unusual to trade bulky gold coins for gemstones, then sew them into clothes so they wouldn't be stolen. And a dwarf's nimble fingers meant you never knew where they might be hidden.

Thrusting his arms through the holes in his vest and combing through his bountiful white beard with his hand, he grinned at the others. "And I've just taken care of my traveling expenses. I guess I'll join you."

"Oh?" High Elf Archer said, narrowing her eyes like a cat. "If you only *guess*, you don't have to come."

"Speak for yourself. No need to come along if you're so desperate to avoid me."

"Hrk…!"

High Elf Archer's long ears flicked backward; she put both hands on the table and leaned in toward Dwarf Shaman.

"Oh, now I'm really angry. Okay, dwarf, you and me!"

"Ho-ho, grown a little spine, have we? Don't expect me to go easy on you." His smile seemed out of place as he set two wine bottles and two cups on the table. "Fire wine for me. Grape wine for you. Sound fair?"

"Perfect!"

Now there was an uproar. The contestants poured their drinks and flung them back.

"Oh, hey, look. Something's going on!"

"Heh-heh… Wanna take bets?"

Of course, no adventurer could resist a friendly wager.

Spearman smirked happily; Witch took off her hat and immediately declared herself the bookmaker. A happy cry went up, and one adventurer after another, goaded by drink, loosened their purse strings.

The first gold coins to fall into Witch's hat came from the hand of Female Knight. Next to her, Heavy Warrior stood, looking perturbed. "My money's on the girl. Three gold pieces!"

"Hey, that's pretty bold. You sure about that?"

"Heh-heh-heh. Call it a dark horse bet. I'm Lawful Good, after all, and I have the gods' blessing…"

"Yeah, win or lose, the Supreme God ain't the type to punish gambling, huh?"

"I'm for the dwarf, then." "No, the girl!" "Drink! Drink! Drink!"

Watching the contest pick up steam amid the clamor, Priestess wore a look of trepidation.

"Shouldn't we stop them…?"

"I doubt it will go on very long," Goblin Slayer responded shortly.

After all, Dwarf Shaman was an experienced drinker, and High Elf Archer could barely hold her liquor. The winner seemed self-evident.

"No, no, our barbarian is most stubborn. The conclusion is not foregone."

Lizard Priest happily watched the archer, her face bright red, go for another cup of grape wine.

"More! I got plenty more in me…!"

"Coming right up!"

She hadn't begun to slur her words yet; her eyes hadn't begun to drift.

Cups smacked down onto the table. *Glug, glug, glug,* in went the wine.

An appreciative noise went up from the crowd as she grabbed the cup and drained it in a single gulp.

As moments in time go, this wasn't much; no one would remember it. Even so, they spent it merrily.

Standing next to High Elf Archer, who lay drunk as a lord on the table, Dwarf Shaman raised his fists and roared in victory. He didn't seem to question how much prestige there really was in beating an elf at a drinking contest.

"All right, then, me next," said Female Knight, but Heavy Warrior frantically stopped her. ("You're a mean drunk.") The girl and the half-elf boy in their party laughed and jeered.

Watching nearby, Spearman rolled up his sleeves, goaded on by Witch. Not to be outdone, Female Knight gave Heavy Warrior a shove.

An arm-wrestling contest began next. The participants might have been unwilling, but once it had started, they weren't going to lose.

A chant bubbled up. Dwarf Shaman came forward to be the referee, and Witch held out her pointed hat again. It seemed there would be no end. Who would win, who would lose? Again there was a hail of coins.

Spearman won. Then, Heavy Warrior won.

"Okay! Me next!" cried Novice Warrior, but he was met with an "Oh, stop" from Apprentice Priestess.

Heavy Warrior nodded his approval at the boy's bravado, then grabbed him as he tried to run and mussed up his hair.

Two inexperienced young men were next to arm wrestle.

With the onlooking adventurers cheering blithely for their favorite, Dwarf Shaman gave the signal to begin.

"Goblin Slayer, sir…"

It seemed like the appropriate moment. When Priestess looked up at him, the word "right" slipped out from underneath the helmet, and he nodded.

"Two! Three!"

"Hrm."

He hefted the limp figure, who was somehow as beautiful as a branch. Goblin Slayer grunted at the weight, even though the body was so slim it looked like it might break in half.

He glanced at Priestess. She was smiling. *What can you do?*

"Don't be mad later," he murmured so quietly no one else could have heard, then bent slightly and positioned himself under High Elf Archer.

Then he rose, one hand on her behind, and hefted her onto his back with a motion that suggested a violent toss.

"Vwoo, wah…"

"I have no idea what you're trying to say."

"Hmm? Fooo…"

Was it the common tongue she was failing to speak? Or elvish? Or was it simply the language of dreams?

At Goblin Slayer's curt words, a smile melted across High Elf Archer's face.

"I'll take her back to her room," Goblin Slayer said briefly, rocking the elf gently as if she were a child. "But you have to help her change."

"Yes, sir. Leave it to me."

Priestess made a fist, the most natural person to help.

"Hmm! Now to rest, tomorrow to ride, and then to work…," Lizard Priest said cheerily, stretching out his neck as if he could see it all already. "What fun it shall be to drag along our hungover friend."

"If she's still drunk in the morning, I'll give her an Antidote."

"Goblin Slayer, sir, that's a bit much…"

Priestess seemed taken aback, but Goblin Slayer said blandly:

"That was a joke."

Priestess and Lizard Priest exchanged a look, then burst out laughing.

It wasn't the joke that made them happy, but the fact that he had made it.

It was rare for him to be in such high spirits.

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INTERLUDE

Of the Gods Making Merry

Somewhere else—immensely far away, yet incredibly close.

Done! So saying, the goddess, Illusion, wiped the sweat from her brow.

She unrolled a large sheet of paper on which there was—gracious!—a vast dungeon.

Illusion spun about her map in an excess of happiness, then suddenly stopped.

Darn! That’s right. A dungeon isn’t complete without monsters!

That’s what adventures are supposed to be about, after all. Dungeons! Dragons! Tunnels! Trolls! A few traps wouldn’t hurt, either. What to do, what to do?

Illusion dropped a few goblins in, just to get started. You had to have goblins.

But she couldn’t figure out the next step. What to do?

Strong adventurers need strong foes, and weaker ones need enemies to match. Otherwise, the adventurers wouldn’t be able to get into the quest, and then no one would have fun.

And then along came a god who said, *Let me show you a trick*.

It was Truth. *Really?* Illusion looked at him doubtfully.

Truth, after all, had a reputation for doing rather unpleasant things.

He would whisper some evil thing in the ear of a quest giver, for example, repeatedly betraying adventurers and then silencing them forever. If a party was looking for traps with a ten-foot pole, he would place a trap eleven feet away.

Just watch, Truth said to the dubious Illusion and pulled a book out of thin air. Opening the dog-eared cover and flipping through the pages, he exclaimed, *Come out, foul monsters! Come out, traps!*

Truth touched pictures that could have been alive, and they appeared in his palm.

Then, before Illusion could say a word, he dropped the monsters and traps into her labyrinth.

Truth cackled at Illusion’s distraught *Oh!*

Now just hand out a little oracle to some heretic sect, and it’ll be perfect!

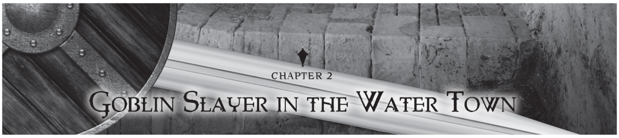
I wonder…, Illusion murmured, but it was too late.

The dice were already rolling.

…*Oh.*

Seriously?

Then, *he* and *she* showed up.



CHAPTER 2

Goblin Slayer in the Water Town

The water town was an old city two days east of the frontier across the plain, a great white-walled fortress that sat at the confluence of many rivers, under a canopy of trees so green as to be black.

Travelers came from far and wide to this city, built on a fortress from the Age of the Gods. It was full of boats coming and going, merchants with their goods, languages of every kind, chaotic and beautiful. Positioned on the western edge of the interior and the eastern edge of the frontier, the water town was the largest city for quite a ways.

A carriage clattered and bounced over a bridge, passing through a castle gate in the middle of a lake.

The gate was engraved with the crest of the God of Law: the sword and scales, the symbols of law and justice. Even on the frontier, where monsters and villains ran rampant, the light of the law shone. People could live in peace, even if only tenuously.

The carriage ran along ruts that had been carved into the flagstone over hundreds or even thousands of years. Some time later, it stopped in a large parking area, and adventurers jumped out one after another.

“Ahh… My butt’s sore!”

High Elf Archer gave a great stretch to loosen up a body that had endured much jangling on the long carriage ride.

The sun was high in the sky and would soon reach its zenith. It was noon.

All around them were shops supplying travelers, and the smells of food and drink wafted on the air: The scents of searing meat and sizzling fat. The sugary odor of baked sweets. The town had everything, from foods that could be found anywhere to startling foreign offerings.

The vendors were much the same.

Here, a dwarf merchant bellowing at the top of his lungs; there, an elf clowning about to attract customers. A rhea fruit seller was dashing about, selling apples as fast as she could move. Humans called out to one another. Farther away, a lizardman was preaching a sermon. And was that a dark elf running a shop?

"Oh-ho! Looks like a lovely place," Dwarf Shaman said with a twitch of his nose, taking it all in. He slapped his protruding stomach. "An anvil for a chest, a wheel rut for a bum—you'll get a balance yet. Time does wear away all things!"

"…Looks like it's worn you away quite a bit."

"Ho-ho-ho! But I stand tall among the dwarves!"

High Elf Archer glared at Dwarf Shaman as he guffawed in his usual great voice.

Priestess, an unintended victim of the dwarf's comment, reached back and awkwardly tried to cover her underdeveloped rear end with her hand.

"A-anyway, shouldn't we go meet our quest giver?"

"Yes."

She had learned well from her mentor Goblin Slayer, master of the forceful change of subject.

He showed no sign of noticing this, though, as he pulled the now crumpled sheepskin page from his bag. It had gotten quite wrinkled from the careless way he had shoved it into the bag, but he didn't appear to notice that, either.

"It seems we can find them at the Temple of Law."

"This way, then!"

High Elf Archer's argument was going nowhere fast, so she cut it off with an elegant flourish of her hand in the direction of the Temple.

"You know the way?"

"I've been here before."

Then, she smiled widely and set off at a jaunty pace.

This, in fact, was the town where she had heard the song of Orcbolg—Goblin Slayer.

She made a show of swinging her hips as she walked down streets she knew and the others did not. Her four companions followed behind.

The streets were of closely laid flagstone, well traveled by carriages, and rivers crisscrossed the city everywhere, forded by ferries. The town was an incredible place, not least because of how it used the old ruins with hardly any alteration.

There were buildings, of course: shops and inns, even small apartments, all decorated with beautiful carvings. The streets were like a living fashion show, with people wearing the latest styles of both the frontier and the interior. The water town was the very epitome of a cosmopolitan city.

"But, um, well… Do you really think there are goblins here?"

Priestess looked down as she walked, as if her old vestments embarrassed her compared to the dresses of the girls walking by. Those were elegant, gorgeous, and womanly clothes. Not like hers, worn with the day-to-day work of adventuring.

She ought to have been embarrassed at being ashamed, though.

"I suspect so."

Goblin Slayer's blunt response gave no indication whether he noticed her discomfort. Either way, Priestess was grateful for him. He never got distracted.

"Oh-ho, hmm?" Lizard Priest stuck out his tongue in a show of interest. "And milord Goblin Slayer, what makes you say that?"

"This place has the air of a village that's been targeted by goblins."

"The air…?"

Dwarf Shaman gave a dubious snort from his round nose. The only things he could discern in the air were the smells of water, stone, and the food at a nearby shop. There was no hint of the rotten stink unique to goblin lairs.

"Can't rightly say I follow."

"That's 'cause dwarves are so thick."

"As if you understand him any better."

High Elf Archer snickered at Dwarf Shaman as he stood with his arms folded and his head cocked.

She didn't seem to mind even when he fixed her with his most intent glare. She just waved her hand.

"Now, now, elves live in the forest. I don't expect to know anything about city smells."

Dwarf Shaman was about to retort but was suddenly hushed.

From behind High Elf Archer, Lizard Priest had let out a sharp hiss.

"The middle of town is not the place for your commotions."

"I know that. For someone so scaly, you sure are prickly."

"You're just soft, dwarf," the elf said.

Lizard Priest clicked his tongue, and this time the two fell quiet.

Priestess giggled at the scene.

The elf and the dwarf didn't have it in them to argue anymore. They walked slowly through the sparkling town of water, taking in the sights. It was common here to see those who had words but were not human, as well as other adventurers.

Only Goblin Slayer was constantly alert to their surroundings.

"I don't know about smells or whatever, but I really don't think goblins are going to jump out at us right here in town," High Elf Archer said with an annoyed sigh.

"You can't be sure." Goblin Slayer's response was sharp. "I recall it happening once."

Though his weapon was not drawn, he moved in much the same way as he did through a cave, with a bold but remarkably quiet stride.

He was the only one who attracted odd looks from passersby: an adventurer in grimy leather armor and a cheap-looking helmet, walking through town as though he were in a dungeon.

Perhaps some took him for some new kind of performer; it was nothing he could help. And if High Elf Archer hid her face from embarrassment, well, he couldn't help that, either.

Despite all this, he was unlikely to change his ways.

"And where is this Temple of ours?" Lizard Priest's tail waved gently behind him.

"Look, you can see it already. Right over there."

High Elf Archer pointed with a slim finger to a building across the river. It was a stunning shrine made of white marble, featuring countless pillars. Even those seeing it for the first time understood that it was a temple.

The Temple of Light and Order, emblazoned with the scales and sword that represented law and justice.

"Wow…," Priestess breathed at the sight. The Temple of the Earth Mother where she had grown up was hardly a poor building, but…

…*This* place practically screamed that it was the home of a god.

Her face relaxed with happiness, her cheeks a touch red with excitement, and turned back.

"Goblin Slayer, sir! It's incredible!"

"Is it?"

He couldn't have offered a more blunt response.

Perhaps they just had different ways of looking at it. It was clear to everyone that he was evaluating the Temple as a possible goblin nest.

“Gosh…!”

Priestess puffed out her cheeks, even though she knew it was childish.

Come to think of it…

She realized she had forgotten to ask the most important thing of all.

“Um, Goblin Slayer, sir?”

“What?”

“Is the quest giver a priest of the Supreme God?”

“No.”

He answered as if it meant nothing to him, then said:

“It’s the archbishop.”

At that, Priestess’s enthusiasm evaporated.

“Whaaat?!”

She would never have imagined the quest giver might be *her*.

Priestess gripped her sounding staff with both hands and let out an inadvertent cry. The person responsible for the law all across the western frontier. No, more than that. For she was known as…

…Sword Maiden.

§

There were many visitors to the Temple of Law.

In part, it was not just believers in the Supreme God who came to supplicate there.

The building was also a court, where judgments were made in the name of God. Cases ranged from simple everyday disputes to matters of life and death.

There was a ceaseless flow of those who wished to have their cases heard in the merciless light of God.

Deeper into the Temple, they passed through a waiting room full of such people.

Past the courtrooms where cases were heard, past hallways narrow with bookshelves to the innermost place, silent and lined with marble pillars.

In this deepest part of the Temple was a worship hall where an image of the Supreme God in the form of the sun was revered.

It was like something out of a myth.

The sunlight slipped down between the pillars in great golden sheets. There was no out-of-place noise; the silence was absolute. This was a holy place.

And at the altar knelt a woman, long staff in hand, praying.

She wore white robes over her robust figure. Her golden hair glittered in the sun. Her staff, which depicted a sword from whose hilt hung a set of scales, showed the equality of justice and law.

She was so dazzling one could only think that if the Supreme God were to be incarnated as a woman, this would be her.

Distressingly, her eyes were hidden with a black kerchief. Not that it in any way impugned her beauty; the cloth may even have made it all the more striking.

"—?"

Suddenly, she looked up.

The sacred silence had been shattered by bold, casual footsteps.

"G-Goblin Slayer, sir! Please try to be quieter…"

"This is an urgent job. If they don't mind our entering, there's no reason to wait."

"I thought you seemed like the impatient type, Orcbolg."

"Everyone's impatient compared to an elf!"

"Such clamor is unbecoming. Be it a foreign deity or no, we are in the house of God."

Loud, lively, rough, robust. To *her* it was tremendously nostalgic.

"

The Gold-ranked adventurer who, ten years before, had been the demise of the Demon Lord.

Not a hero of legend, but a unique presence who had emerged from humankind.

She was vastly beyond Priestess, freshly promoted to Obsidian. The difference between them was like the gulf between a goblin and a dragon.

When she had been an acolyte, Priestess probably could not have brought herself to be in this awesome place at all.

"I, um, that is, it's…it's an honor to meet you," Priestess said in a strained voice, making a small bow. Her eyes shone and her cheeks were red.

"A most honored warrior and…a sweet, most honored priestess."

From beyond the kerchief, a gentle gaze brushed Priestess's cheek and then moved on, or so she felt.

She could hear her own heart pounding inside her little chest. She hoped it wasn't audible to anyone else.

"And these august personages are…?"

"Mm. Their compatriots—their party members," Lizard Priest said when the gaze settled on him. "I venerate the most fearsome naga, but rest assured, I shall give you all my support." His unusual palms-together gesture was solemn.

Of course, his gesture differed from the way clergy of the Supreme God showed respect to one another. But that was not the point. What was most important was that he show his intention to respect others.

Everything began from that point. Without a flicker in her smile, Sword Maiden drew a cross in the air with her finger.

"Welcome to the Temple of Law. I am honored to receive you, O scaled priest."

High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman, for their part, evinced little interest in the goings-on.

They gave slight bows from behind Lizard Priest, but they had their heads together, whispering to each other.

"Hmm. Quite something for human work," said the dwarf.

"Yeah. What a beautiful picture," said the elf.

Their admiration seemed to be focused on the ceiling high above their heads.

There, rich brushstrokes composed a mural depicting the battles of the Age of the Gods.

They had seen cave paintings before, drawn in blood on the walls of ruins, but this was something else entirely.

Order and chaos, Illusion and Truth, the gods raged against each other with body and spirit and soul.

Against a field of stars, miracles and magic whirled about, flew back and forth, shined, burned. Finally, the gods reached out for a cube and began to indulge themselves in throwing it.

The board they played on was this very world, and the pieces they played with, everyone in it.

Hence why those with words, those who prayed, tried to live correctly.

The two of them, who were kin to the spirits that filled this world, were not unlike the gods. While elves and dwarves respected the gods, however, they did not mindlessly worship them. The gods were very much “with” them; they would listen to the gods’ advice, but not be their slaves. This was why there were so few elf priests—though the dwarves still cleaved to the smithy god, themselves.

“Ho-ho. How very…adventurer-like you all are.”

An eccentric warrior. A pure priestess. A foreign priest. A dwarf magic user. And an elf ranger.

The archbishop gave the five of them a small, strange smile.

…?

Priestess thought the smile brimmed with loneliness and longing.

“And if so, then we are like each other. I welcome you wholeheartedly.”

It took but a moment.

Sword Maiden made a wide sweep of her arms, as if to embrace the adventurers. The gesture evoked a loving mother yet beguiling like a harlot urging someone into her bedchamber.

An average human man would have given a heavy swallow right about then.

Goblin Slayer, however, ignored all of this. “Enough complimenting each other. Tell us the details of the quest.” He was oblivious to the mortified look that came over Priestess’s face.

“N-now just a minute, Goblin Slayer, sir…”

Too much was too much.

Priestess grabbed his gauntleted hand and pulled him close.

“You can’t talk that way to the archbishop…”

"I don't care."

But Sword Maiden was gently shaking her head.

"I am most pleased that such a hardy adventurer has come to me."

"Are you?"

"May I ask, out of personal curiosity," she murmured, "if kin of yours were to join with chaos, could you kill them?"

"No," Goblin Slayer replied bluntly. "I have no living relatives."

"Is that so…?"

Goblin Slayer watched the bright red lips from inside his helmet as they whispered.

"So. Where are the goblins?"

Behind him, the other adventurers sighed.

§

"It began about a month ago."

Sword Maiden nodded to the others to sit on the floor, then sat with her feet together, looking forlorn.

"Late one night, I sent an acolyte girl to deliver a message from this Temple…"

"Was she killed? Or kidnapped?" asked Goblin Slayer.

"…She didn't come back that night. The next day, her body was found in a back alley." A look of grief came over her face.

"Hmm." Goblin Slayer cupped his chin in his hand, thinking.

"According to the person who found her, she appeared to have been cut up while she still lived."

Sword Maiden's words were calmness itself without a moment's hesitation. But behind them was a slight tremble.

Was it terror? Intimidation? Or perhaps profound pain, sadness. Priestess couldn't be sure.

"That's… Well, that's awful," Priestess said.

"The very fact of murder is sad enough, though it happens from time to time…"

"While still alive…," Goblin Slayer muttered quietly. "At that location?"

"…Yes."

"Was any part of her eaten? Or was she merely killed? Do you have any other details…?"

"Come on, Orcbolg. You're being insensitive, even for you," High Elf Archer said, pursing her lips with a frown. She had noticed Sword Maiden's clouded expression.

Goblin Slayer fell silent for a long moment, then said, "Please go on."

"It was truly a terrible incident."

Yes, terrible.

The Temple of Law was here, to be sure, but this was still the frontier. Not long ago it had been a lawless expanse, home to monsters and bandits. It could hardly now be without crime.

Though the light of the Supreme God shone abundantly, it was not enough to reach into twisted human hearts.

"Law and order… It is said they have continually been the weaker in the struggles of this world." Sword Maiden continued, in a murmur, "Though evil has not triumphed in this world, neither has it been vanquished," and joined her hands, offering a brief prayer to the god she served.

Waiting for her to finish, Lizard Priest stuck out his neck as if paying particular attention.

"So, is this to say the investigation has yielded no results?"

"…Yes. I am ashamed to say it, but it's true…"

Perhaps an agent of chaos was involved or a follower of the Dark Gods? Or something else?

Amid a slew of hypotheses and conjectures, the town watch had immediately launched an investigation. For a city whose streets bustled day and night, there was surprisingly little evidence. And without evidence, there was nothing to be done, no matter how badly one wished to catch the criminal.

In the midst of all this, the water town experienced a dramatic rise in crime.

"Petty theft, random attacks in the streets. Violence toward women, kidnappings…"

"Hmm." Goblin Slayer snorted as Sword Maiden mournfully related the state of things. "I don't like it."

"You don't like anything, Beard-cutter," Dwarf Shaman said, well accustomed to his companion, and gave Sword Maiden a wave as if to say, *Don't mind him.* He rested his chin in his hand and his elbow on his folded knees. He didn't even feel like having a drink of wine. "I admit it's rather strange. But surely that's not why you summoned us here."

“You’re correct. They decided that if they could not track down the killer, perhaps they could catch him at his work.”

Thus, not only the town watch and guard, but adventurers, too, were dispatched.

They broke up into several groups, diligently patrolling the night streets and chasing down any suspicious characters.

It was a blunt approach, a plan marked by its practicality.

But it worked.

One of the adventurer groups saw small humanoids attacking a woman and cut them down.

In the light of the adventurers’ handheld oil lamps, the tiny corpses turned out to be…

“—goblins. Beyond doubt.”

“Hmm.” Goblin Slayer, who had been listening silently, made a sound of deep interest. “It was goblins?”

“Goblins… Not just one or two, I suppose,” Dwarf Shaman breathed, running his hand pensively along the flowing beard of which he was so proud.

Priestess tapped her finely formed pointer finger against her lips and made a thoughtful sound. “The question is how they got into town,” she said. “They certainly didn’t just walk through the gate.”

“That’d leave an underground route or the waterways,” Dwarf Shaman said.

High Elf Archer chimed in. “All these victims—those monsters weren’t just passing through.”

“What do you think?” Goblin Slayer’s helmet turned toward Lizard Priest.

The scaled priest gave a contemplative roll of his eyes, then opened his jaws and said, “Goblins…hmm. Goblins live underground. This town is built above a more ancient city. Surely there are ruins of some sort below it…”

“No question, then,” Goblin Slayer said decisively. “They’re stupid, but they’re not foolish. If I were them, I would simply nest in the sewers.”

“Once again, you demonstrate your ability to think like a goblin…”

It was hard to tell whether High Elf Archer was admiring or sarcastic.

“Of course,” Goblin Slayer replied with a nod. “If you don’t know how they think, you can’t fight them.”

Sword Maiden betrayed a hint of confusion at Goblin Slayer's words, but nonetheless, she nodded firmly.

"Surely it was the Supreme God who guided an adventurer like you to accept my quest." A faint smile rose suddenly to her face, and her voice was clear; her relief was evident. "I myself, after a month of reflection, concluded they must be underground."

"A month?"

"Yes. And at first, I offered a quest to the adventurers of this town…"

"What did they do?" Priestess asked quietly, but Sword Maiden shook her head wordlessly.

"I see…," Priestess said.

That was all the answer she needed.

They didn't come back.

Many Porcelain and Obsidian adventurers who went to slay goblins met the same fate—like two of the three companions Priestess had first ventured into a cavern with.

Once the disturbing scene had been unexpectedly revived in her memory, it was not easy to wipe away.

Priestess almost thought she could catch the dank, rotten whiff of the cave and scrunched up her face a little.

"It was then that I heard a song of Goblin Slayer, hero of the frontier."

"A song?" Goblin Slayer said, uncomprehending. "What do you mean?"

"You didn't know? You're a ballad, Orcbolg." High Elf Archer drew a circle in the air with her pointer finger. "Turns out it doesn't have much to do with the real you, though."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"But surely you know," Lizard Priest said, narrowing his eyes. "Wherever there are bards, they will sing of valorous deeds."

"To what end?"

"Don't tell me you don't see the connection, Beard-cutter."

Not that he wasn't interested.

Dwarf Shaman pounded his belly at Goblin Slayer's display of perplexity.

"When word of your doings gets around, everyone will want you to slay their goblins for them!"

"Hmm…"

Sword Maiden's eyes, hidden behind cloth, briefly met Goblin

Slayer's, hidden behind metal.

She bit her lip, then with a look of determination, bowed her head.

"Please. I beg you to save our town."

"I don't know whether I can," Goblin Slayer said frankly. "But I will kill the goblins."

It was simply not how one spoke to an archbishop, let alone a former hero.

Priestess said, "Goblin Slayer, sir!" and tugged on his arm, lips pursed. "You *must* find a better, you know, way to…talk…"

"It's the truth, isn't it?"

"That's why it's so important to be careful how you say it."

"Hrm."

Goblin Slayer let out a harsh snort, but even he could only fall silent.

Lizard Priest gave a jovial wave of his tail at the sight of his flummoxed friend, but his tone was serious.

"If they're in the sewers, our usual tricks won't work."

"I'm kind of sick of our usual tricks, anyway," High Elf Archer said dejectedly. "They're…weird." She gave him a gentle jab with her elbow. "You know what he means, right?"

"Yes." Goblin Slayer nodded. "We have to go in and destroy them, but the underground area is large. It would be troublesome if some escaped."

"No! Being in the sewers means we'll be right below everyone who lives here. Get it?"

She didn't know why she was surprised. Orcbolg had been this way as long as she'd known him. Burning down fortresses, making people douse themselves in guts, killing goblins in the most terrible ways, drowning them, using human wave tactics…

"No fire! No water! No poison gas! No entrails!"

"I told you, I have no intention of using any of those," he replied in a tone he normally reserved for scolding Priestess, bringing High Elf Archer up short.

Her long ears jerked in annoyance, but she was the one who at last said, "Fine," and desisted.

Lizard Priest ignored her mutter of "What's with this guy?" and said, "But why can't your town watch or your army handle these creatures?" He slapped the stone floor with his tail to emphasize his doubts. "I am not acquainted with the situation of this town, but surely this is not beyond their jurisdiction."

"They…"

"…no doubt told you there was no need to involve the military for something as trivial as goblins," Goblin Slayer said brusquely when Sword Maiden hesitated.

Sword Maiden looked down slightly, and her lips trembled. A most elegant answer.

It wasn't hard to understand.

The adventurers went in precisely because the town watch and the military did not get involved.

The town watch took money to train and equip, and their families lived in town. If they were injured or killed, a pension would have to be paid to their relatives.

How different it was with adventurers, who took responsibility for everything themselves.

Above all else, the resurrection of the Demon Lord in the spring was still fresh in their minds.

"Can't be helped, I suppose," Dwarf Shaman said with a sigh and a stroke of his white beard. "Plenty of those demons still running around the Capital. I guess this is what adventurers are for…"

"Mrrm. Two sure founts of trouble are human money and human politics," Lizard Priest said.

"I am most ashamed to admit the truth of your words," Sword Maiden said, as if confessing a sin.

Tragedies in this world were many and endless.

As Sword Maiden had said, ever since the world's inception, law and order had been lesser lights.

No one had the power to change that, not even slightly.

Even the Earth Mother, who offered salvation to those who were broken—her salvation was only for those who wished, asked, and prayed for it…

Hence why monsters were known as the Unpraying.

And yet…

"I do not much care for such things," Sword Maiden whispered, turning her face aside.

She sounded like a young lady who had done some embarrassing thing.

"I don't care." Goblin Slayer cut through it all with a few curt words. "How do we get underground?"

"…"

Sword Maiden's hidden eyes played across his helmet as if seeking some expression.

"Hey."

"Oh. Yes, excuse me."

The voice that answered his call was somehow distant, almost delirious.

Sword Maiden reached into the neckline of her thin garment, withdrawing a piece of paper from her generous bosom.

The folded sheet looked quite old; it seemed to be a map of the sewers.

"I think it would be best for you to enter the sewers via the well in the back garden of this Temple."

Her slim, white fingers caressed the map as she spread it out on the floor. The wrinkled sheepskin made a rustling noise as she unfolded it.

"Hence, during your investigations, I offer you this Temple as lodging."

"Mm."

Goblin Slayer made a soft sound as he studied the map. It was discolored, already chewed by insects, but it spoke to the sheer size of the sewers. Perhaps it had made some sense to the ancient architects, but now…

"It's like a maze," Priestess said anxiously, looking at the map over Goblin Slayer's shoulder.

Goblins worked their way completely through this underground labyrinth to attack humans? Facing them would be much harder than fighting other monsters, even poorly.

Maybe I'm just nervous. Had he noticed her quietly shift her gaze to him?

Goblin Slayer pulled the map closer, then tapped it lightly.

"How accurate is this map?"

"These are old plans from when the Temple was built…"

Sword Maiden shook her head gently. The gesture sent beautiful waves through her rich hair.

"But the city's water does flow down there. If anything has collapsed, I cannot imagine it's very much."

"All right."

With a nod, he nonchalantly rolled up the map and tossed it into the air.

Lizard Priest deftly stretched out his arm and caught it in his sharp claws.

"You're our navigator."

"Certainly."

"Let's go, then. No time to lose."

No sooner had he spoken than Goblin Slayer set off with his bold stride.

The other adventurers looked at one another, then nodded helplessly.

"Well, that's Orcbolg for you," High Elf Archer said lightly, rising. She adjusted her great bow on her back, counted her arrows, then went after him at a trot.

Elves' footsteps were so quiet they might weigh nothing at all; Lizard Priest found them all but inaudible. He gently opened the map he'd caught, double-checked it, folded it again, and put it carefully in his bag. "There do seem to be ruins deeper in, but we shall not know until we see for ourselves."

"You said it. And we can't count on our long-eared lass to lead the way. Beard-cutter is another matter."

Dwarf Shaman stroked his beard, unable to watch them walk into such danger alone.

The two of them patted each other on the back, then stood up, looking pleased.

"You must excuse us, then. We shall be on our way."

"Can't keep long-ears and Beard-cutter waitin' now!"

And the two of them departed.

Priestess had no time to gawk, either.

Scurrying to ready her gear, she straightened her garments and stood.

"Well, um, milady archbishop. I—I'll be going, too."

Ahem. She gripped her staff with both hands and bowed her head to Sword Maiden.

"If I may…," Sword Maiden called out to Priestess as she turned to leave. She reached out one slim hand as if beckoning.

"Yes?" Priestess asked, looking questioningly at her.

"Perhaps it is not my place to ask this, as the quest giver…"

Priestess could not quite read Sword Maiden's expression as she spoke. All emotion seemed to have left her lovely face, like a receding tide. It was hard to escape the impression that she had donned a mask.

"But are you not afraid?"

Her question was quiet but clear.

Priestess knitted her brow slightly; her eyes wandered the room. What should she say?

"I… Yes. I am afraid. But…"

Then, she said nothing more. She had never stopped being afraid, not since she had first entered a goblin den on that day long ago.

And yet…

Her averted gaze followed those adventurers, walking ahead of her, some ways away…

A towering lizardman. Next to him, a stubby dwarf. A slender elf. And…

A warrior. Dressed in a cheap-looking helmet, grimy leather armor, with a small round shield and a sword that seemed a strange length.

"Hee-hee."

Standing there, nearly alone, a smile welled up on Priestess's face.

She was a disciple of the Earth Mother, but if she were to pray to the Supreme God she would ask one thing:

That she never be without even one of these companions.

"…I'm sure we'll be all right."

And with that, she shyly offered a prayer under her breath.

INTERLUDE

Of the Two of Them, Then

“…All right, the papers are in order. Thank you so much for always making these food deliveries!”

“Of course. This is our livelihood, after all!”

“Ahh, everyone loves the things from your farm, though. They’re delicious—that’s most important—but they’re cheap, too.”

“Ha-ha-ha! …Yeah, everyone’s been so kind to us since…since what happened last spring. It’s been a huge help… Sigh…”

“Why the long face? Something the matter? If it’s the price, I’m sorry to say I can’t negotiate, though.”

“Oh no, uh… No. It’s just, he’s away, and I’m…you know?”

“Heh-heh! He’ll be fine. Mr. Goblin Slayer is always prepared.”

“I wonder. I guess he’s not the type to just wander into trouble.”

“Personally, I would think you’d be more worried about…*other* things. What with all the time he’ll have on his hands.”

“What other things?”

“Please. He’s in a far-off city with two women. And not a small city, either. There’ll be lots of opportunities…”

“B-but there’s a couple of men with him, too, right? A-anyway, he wouldn’t…”

“I admit, he’s never seemed like the type.”

“…Hey. In adventure stories, they always… I mean, the hero always saves the princess or the village girl, and then they get married, right?”

“Sure. Lots of plays and books like that.”

“Does it really happen?”

“All the time. Frankly, it leaves our female adventurers wanting for husbands.”

“…Okay. So, when he saves some girl, what do you think he looks like? To her?”

“Huh? Well…like the frontier champion, the slayer of goblins…

I mean, speaking just to his *looks*…”

“……”

“Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, please.”

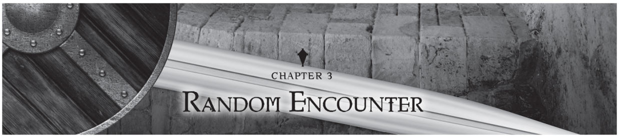
“There’s a festival coming up, isn’t there? The autumn harvest.”

“Can’t miss it.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Let’s do it.”

And so they were decided.



CHAPTER 3

RANDOM ENCOUNTER

A shrill scream echoed across the stone of the waterway built by those ancient people.

A goblin fell backward, a hatchet buried in its forehead.

Without flinching, Goblin Slayer kicked the corpse into the river of sewage that ran nearby. It fell in with a splash, then floated among the polluted bubbles for a moment before sinking out of sight.

“That seems to be the last of them.” Lizard Priest wiped the blood from his blade, a fang-sword that had recently been buried in a goblin’s throat.

The flame of an abandoned torch on the floor wavered, and the light danced over the carnage all around.

The bodies were perhaps 40 percent goblin; the rest were the rotting remains of adventurers.

And there, up ahead where the waterway split into countless branches, loomed a mysterious shadow.

“No… There’s something else.”

High Elf Archer was not one to miss something like that. As she spoke, she set another arrow into her bow. Her ears flicked up and down; then, with a faint hiss, she pulled back the spider’s silk bowstring and let it go.

With a *twang* like a fine lute, the arrow sliced through the air.

It arced, turning the corner as if it had a life of its own. A moment later there was a high-pitched “Gyaa!” and then a soft noise of something hitting the water.

“*That’s* the last of them.”

“Phew… Nice shot.”

At High Elf Archer’s exultant exclamation, Priestess, who had been clutching her sounding staff, let out a sigh.

She kept her spirit continually heightened, so she could invoke a miracle at any time. She was glad, though, that she hadn’t needed to use one—could save it for later.

"But…to find so many goblins right under the town…"

"This is what I expected."

Goblin Slayer nonchalantly propped up the body of an adventurer. A bit of rotten flesh tumbled to the ground.

The corpse had been so well chewed by rats that it was no longer possible to tell whether it was male or female, but he didn't hesitate.

Chain mail darkened with dried blood. A broken helmet. This was probably a warrior once. Their item bag had already been torn to shreds. Goblin Slayer looked through everything the goblins hadn't already stolen and took a longsword, scabbard and all, from the body's hip.

He drew the blade and found a cutting edge with no rust at all. Perhaps it had been well-oiled?

"They must have been ambushed." One blow to the head most likely. Not even a chance to draw their weapons.

The sword was too heavy for a goblin and longer than Goblin Slayer liked, but it wasn't a bad weapon.

"All right." Goblin Slayer nodded, sheathing the sword again. Priestess let out a breath.

"It's not 'all right.' May I?"

"Go ahead."

Goblin Slayer pushed the adventurer's corpse back on its side.

Priestess knelt near the body, her expression dark. She paid no attention to the filthy water that lapped at her white vestments.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, please, by your revered hand, guide the soul of one who has left this world…"

Holding her staff, her eyes closed, whispering in a rhythm almost musical, she prayed, chanted, implored.

Prayed that the souls of the adventurers and the goblins who had died here might be saved by the gods who resided in heaven.

"Would that we could leave you in the soil rather than below it…"

Lizard Priest, following Priestess's lead, put his palms together in an odd gesture, praying for the rebirth of those souls.

"But we take comfort that, by feeding the rats and bugs, you will return to the earth in time."

The Earth Mother and the fearsome naga. Their gods were different; thus, so also were their doctrines.

But in wishing for the happiness of the souls of the dead, they were the same. They knew not where their prayers went, only that there was salvation.

Priestess and Lizard Priest looked at each other, knowing they had each discharged their duty.

“Hmm, there.”

Keeping half an eye on the two of them, High Elf Archer pulled an arrow from a goblin’s corpse.

She checked the bud at the tip and, satisfied that it wasn’t damaged, returned the bolt to her quiver.

“Just so you know, I’m not going to do like you, Orcbolg.” She fixed her eyes briefly on the armored adventurer with the inscrutable expression. *Vwip* went her ears, as if to show her mood. “It looks like this could be a long fight. And I don’t want to use goblin arrows. They’re so crude,” she grumbled.

Goblin Slayer’s eyes flitted to her. “Are they?”

“Yeah, they are.”

“I see.”

“Gracious me,” Dwarf Shaman sighed, stroking his beard.

He had had his hand in his bag of catalysts, ready with a spell, but…

He was looking far away, into the black beyond the light of the torch. As dwellers underground, they could see well in the dark.

“Makes you wonder just how many there are.”

But even his sharp eyes didn’t catch sight of any goblins.

It had been three days since they’d begun their exploration of the sewers, and this was the fifth time they’d been attacked today alone.

§

The sewers of the water town had been completely transformed into a goblin nest. Adventurers who entered the place soon found themselves attacked by the little demons.

The winding network of waterways—effectively a maze—was the goblins’ ally.

The party was attacked repeatedly at irregular intervals, and the search went on and on; they could never let down their guard.

“I am told that this is business as usual for adventurers of a labyrinth city.”

The normally stoic lizardman's complaints were evidence of the toll fatigue had taken on them.

Battle alone would not have done this to them, nor simply walking through a cave. It was the constant vigilance that wore on their nerves.

"…"

Anxiety was clear on Priestess's face, as well. Even her footsteps seemed somehow uncertain.

"Stay calm."

Goblin Slayer, examining every inch of their route closely, was as blunt as usual.

He had taken a fresh torch out of his knapsack and lit it and was now tapping insistently on the walls.

"This is a stone wall. It's unlikely they'll ambush us through it."

"Please don't bring back bad memories." Priestess frowned and shivered. The terror of that first adventure still haunted her.

"…I'm sorry."

"It's all right," was all she said in response to Goblin Slayer's quiet murmur.

Perhaps Dwarf Shaman sensed what was going on between them, because he chuckled quietly and said, "At least with this much garbage around, we don't have to bother to hide our scents."

"Please don't bring back bad memories," High Elf Archer said with a weary wave of her hand.

She stuck out her arm and took a sniff of her hunter's outfit.

In the past, on another dive into underground ruins, Goblin Slayer had forced her to slather herself with goblin guts, alleging it would cover her scent. She had been able to wash her clothes and clean her body, but she had never really forgiven him.

"I'm warning you, Orcbolg, if you ever make me do that again, you're in for it."

Goblin Slayer was silent. He moved his head slightly from side to side.

Maybe he was checking the smell of the area. After a long moment, he answered.

"True, there's no need this time."

"Hrk."

High Elf Archer's ears went back.

The half-opened eye of a sniper fixed on Goblin Slayer.

"Hey, I just remembered."

"What?"

"Orcbolg. You never apologized to me."

"Because it was necessary."

His answer could not have been more direct. High Elf Archer pouted with a "grrr" and fell into a sulk.

"…Hmm?"

Suddenly her ears bounced up and down, and she looked at the ceiling.

"What is it, long-ears?" asked Dwarf Shaman.

"Something feels strange… And I hear the sound of water. Above us?"

Just then, a droplet fell into the waterway—*splish.*

Ripples ran through the sewage. One, two, three.

"Hrm…"

Lizard Priest stuck out his tongue doubtfully and licked his nose.

Ploop! Ploop! More droplets fell.

Soon they were coming down nonstop.

"Is this…rain?" Priestess frowned, looking at the faraway ceiling. The surface of the riverine waterway was full of tiny waves.

High Elf Archer raised her hand uselessly to shield herself from the drops.

"How can it be raining underground?" she asked in confusion.

"The rain's probably up above. It's coming down here through the grates or the river," said Dwarf Shaman, stroking his beard. He looked at Goblin Slayer.

"What do you say, Beard-cutter?"

"If we lose our light, it will be a problem." Goblin Slayer was holding his shield above the freshly lit torch to protect it.

Useless torch, that it could go out so easily. In this respect, lanterns were better. Well, there were pros and cons to everything. Goblin Slayer clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Footing will be more treacherous, too."

"The rain will chill our bodies," Lizard Priest added with a grim nod and look at the party. "I propose a brief rest. Opinions?"

The rain prevented them from either moving forward or going back. There were no objections.

Once they had decided, the adventurers acted quickly. Since the rain had only just started, surfaces were still relatively dry, but if they dawdled, they would end up sitting somewhere wet, and they would only get colder.

They hadn't brought some canopy with them, but any adventurer worth their salt had rain gear in their kit. Once they had all put on their worsted overcoats, they sat in a circle together.

Then, Priestess transferred the flame from their torch to a covered lantern and set it in the middle of their circle.

It didn't warm them much, but it was better than nothing.

"…Hey, Orcbolg. Why don't you like lanterns?" High Elf Archer poked at the light in perplexity, then brushed at it as if to wipe away some soot. "You can just hang them from your belt. You don't need to use a whole hand to hold them."

"A torch can be a weapon," Goblin Slayer said. "A lantern is useless if it breaks."

"Huh."

High Elf Archer seemed disappointed by his answer. She pulled her knees up to her chest.

Goblin Slayer looked at the waterway, ignoring the droplets that dripped from his helmet.

Priestess gave him a compassionate look.

"You should probably at least take off your helmet…don't you think?"

"You never know when or where the enemy will attack."

"You know, Beard-cutter, I've always thought you were a little rough on your equipment. You ought to repair them."

"Yes."

Dwarf Shaman, sitting cross-legged, pulled a wine jar from his bag of catalysts. Breaking the seal, he poured cups of clear fire wine, then quickly handed them to the rest of the party.

The damp smell of the air mixed with the wafting aroma of wine.

"Drink up now. Can't do aught with a frozen body."

"But I…"

"I know. Just take a sip, one mouthful. I know that's all you can manage. I won't hold it against you."

High Elf Archer took the cup reluctantly—indeed, fearfully. She took a dainty sip, wincing as it burned her throat.

"Ohh…"

"Still a young'un when it comes to drink, aren't you?"

"Are you all right?" Priestess asked.

"Y-yeah… But a drunken ranger won't do anyone any good."

High Elf Archer nodded at Priestess, who urged her not to force herself.

Then again, Priestess herself was rather unaccustomed to fire wine. She just pretended the potent wine was medicine and took a quiet sip.

The powerful flavor burned on her tongue. Her eyes darted around desperately.

"Well, I shall have a cup, too, then," said Lizard Priest.

"Of course! Drink up!"

In contrast to the others, Lizard Priest, tail wrapped around his feet, took the brimming cup Dwarf Shaman handed him and poured it all at once into his massive jaws.

"Truly a surpassing flavor. I could drink a barrelful of it."

"Even with my tricks, I can't bring a barrel along. Have a splash, Beard-cutter."

"…"

Goblin Slayer drank the wine through the opening in his visor, never taking his gaze off the waterway.

The rainfall changed from steady to downpour, and the sewage water churned, bubbling violently.

After a while, each of them lapsed into silence.

The patter of raindrops on their overcoats, the slosh of wine being drunk, their own shallow breathing—there was sound everywhere, yet the place seemed strangely hushed.

"We should put something in our stomachs," Goblin Slayer said shortly, in a quiet voice. "A partially empty stomach keeps the blood from pooling. But too empty and we'll slow down."

"Well, if something simple will do…"

Priestess dug in her bag and came up with something wrapped in oil paper.

"Oh-ho!" Dwarf Shaman was tickled having sensed food coming on and gave High Elf Archer a grin and a poke with his elbow. "I knew it. Long-ears, see how your skills are lacking in certain areas?"

"Y-y-you—!"

But she had no comeback.

"…Maybe I'll learn to cook," she muttered, at which Priestess offered to teach her and smiled.

Their meal was hard-cooked bread and a bottle of watered-down grape wine.

It was made to keep a long time, but it was flavorless and cold. These were simply field rations, meant to fill their bellies and moisten their throats.

The adventurers chewed on the bread without pleasure, but also without complaint.

“I was hoping I could make something a little less tough, but…,” Priestess said apologetically, shifting as she wiped a bread crumb from her cheek and put it in her mouth. “I don’t think anyone feels much like eating anything too elaborate right here, anyway…”

“True enough…” High Elf Archer shrugged and made a show of holding her nose.

Full of waves churned up by the rain, the filthy waterway had become more of a filthy river. The sense of smell plays a large role in how something tastes, and here the aroma of grape wine was overwhelmed by moss, mold, and any number of other odors.

“I guess I just don’t understand why anyone would want to eat underground,” High Elf Archer said.

“Oh-ho. Just hang on there, lass.”

You’ll regret it when we get back up above, thought the dwarf as he stared at her with narrowed eyes, but High Elf Archer showed no sign of noticing.

“When we have borne this trial, then let us get something delicious for our stomachs.”

Lizard Priest, who had been drinking grape wine and fire wine in equal measures, jumped into the conversation.

Priestess agreed quietly, cradling her cupful of wine in both hands.

“Now that you mention it, what is good to eat around here?”

“Hmm. Indeed. Let’s see…” Dwarf Shaman stroked his beard. “Around here…”

“Fried river fish, veal liver, and grape wine,” Goblin Slayer said without taking his eyes off the water.

Everyone looked at him.

“And I have heard the grain around here is unpolished, so the batter is quite good.”

Dwarf Shaman, with nothing else to add, gave an exaggerated shrug. “You heard the man.”

“I see you are quite knowledgeable, milord Goblin Slayer.”

“One of my acquaintances is.”

Lizard Priest had leaned in with great interest, but Goblin Slayer's response was brief.

"When I said I was coming here, they told me about the food."

An acquaintance?

Priestess went over the possibilities in her mind: Guild Girl, Cow Girl, or Witch. Maybe Spearman or Heavy Warrior…

She realized how many more acquaintances he had now than when she had joined him a few months earlier and giggled under her breath.

Thus, their short respite from their adventure passed amicably.

But every adventure is rife with danger; in the field, no place is really safe.

It happened about the time the wine was working its way through their bodies, warming their limbs.

"…Hmm?"

Goblin Slayer suddenly made a sound. He immediately rose to one knee and stared intently at the water.

"Something wrong, Goblin Slayer, sir…?"

"No," he muttered. "…But be on your guard."

Priestess nodded at his vague answer.

He must have sensed something. Priestess quickly began to pack her bag, but with one eye to her surroundings. Even if there was nothing there, it was about time for them to be moving on.

"I will help you. Milord spell caster, your blanket."

"Right here."

No one had to tell them what to do. The veteran adventurers moved quickly and efficiently.

High Elf Archer, stooped like Goblin Slayer, kept a hand on her quiver, listening. Her long ears bouncing up and down were the sharpest in the party.

"…Something's coming."

Each of them immediately readied their weapons. Goblin Slayer took out the longsword he had just collected, Lizard Priest a fang-sword. Priestess held her staff anxiously; Dwarf Shaman had his sling; and High Elf Archer drew an arrow from her quiver.

"Beard-cutter!"

"Right."

Goblin Slayer grabbed Dwarf Shaman's lantern with his left hand, the one tied to his shield. There was no time to light a torch. Should he hold the light in his hand?

No. He hung it by his hip instead.

All of them looked past the rain to the far side of the waterway, where the low-hanging mist had dispersed into a fine haze.

This time, all of them could clearly hear the sound of splashing water.

It wasn't the waves. Something was coming through the water toward them.

Without hesitation, Goblin Slayer shined the light of the lantern on the mist-cloaked shape. They could just discern a crude water vessel, like a raft, fashioned of driftwood.

"Goblins!"

The next instant, the monsters on the raft let loose with their handmade bows. Their shots lacked precision, but in the narrow space, they fell like the rain already pelting them.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak…!"

Not just the arrows, but even the drops of water miraculously stopped falling on them.

The impassable barrier gave off a faint glimmer. At its center stood Priestess, clutching her staff with both hands. The prayer had cost some of her own spirit, but it had reached heaven, and the all-merciful goddess had granted the miracle of Protection.

"I can't hold it for lo—"

"It's enough."

Priestess was beginning to sweat, but Goblin Slayer reassured her briefly. The longsword was already in his right hand, and his shield was on his left. "How many?" he asked.

"I can't count them!" yelled back High Elf Archer as she nocked another arrow into her bow, and the bowstring sang as she loosed. "What are you going to do?"

"What I always do," Goblin Slayer said, unmoved by the hail of arrows. He spun the longsword in his hand into a reverse grip. "Kill all the goblins."

He held the sword above his head and then, almost too fast to see, he flung it.

Since there was no intent to harm Priestess, the blade could pass through the Protection barrier, as per the rules.

The sword cut through the incoming arrows and pierced the head of the goblin that appeared to be the chief. He didn't even have time to cry out as he collapsed into the sewage, and the staff he had been holding hit the water with an impressive splash.

"GROOARRB!!"

"GAROORORORORR?!"

The goblins began to howl at the loss of their shaman, and for a moment, the attack faltered.

"That's one. How many spells do you have left?"

"Plenty. I've been saving them!" Dwarf Shaman answered as he put a gemstone in his sling and loosed it.

"…Tunnel, then. Make us a hole."

His eyes widened at the frank instruction.

"Don't be silly now. You want to destroy that town up there?!"

"Not up. Down."

Goblin Slayer reached into his bag.

"Dig under the waterway and drain it," he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"But a city is like a finely wrought machine!" Dwarf Shaman shouted. "Upset even one thing, and the sewers might overflow!"

"It's not fire. It's not water. It's not poison gas."

His puzzlement would have been comical at any other time, but now High Elf Archer shouted at him, "Something else!"

"…Hrm."

Goblin Slayer went quiet, then started to dig through his bag.

The goblins, of course, were not standing idly by. They fired arrows as quickly as they could, their raft drawing ever nearer to shore.

Priestess, her hands still on her staff, gave a cry.

"I can't hold it any longer…!"

"You don't have another one of those Gate scrolls, do you?" Dwarf Shaman said.

"If I did, I would have brought it."

The tactic he had used against the ogre was still fresh in their minds, but a Gate scroll was a very valuable item and not easy to obtain. Part of what made Goblin Slayer unique was his willingness to use something so precious without a moment's hesitation. After all, he had presumably intended to use it against goblins at some point.

As he spoke, Goblin Slayer pulled something from his bag.

"You have a strategy?" Lizard Priest inquired.

"We attack the moment Protection wears off," Goblin Slayer replied.

"Of course."

"Goblins or raft? Which is best?"

"Raft, I suppose."

"All right."

With that brief exchange, Goblin Slayer turned to Priestess.

The girl was clinging to her staff with all her might; she could hardly spare the effort to look his way.

Goblin Slayer glanced up for a moment. *What to tell her?*

"…Cast Protection again. Solidify our defense."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Priestess nodded firmly. Goblin Slayer let out a breath. His empty right hand worked open and closed.

He needed a weapon. Maybe he could at least find a knife somewhere…

"But a moment, milord Goblin Slayer."

Lizard Priest produced a beast's fang from his pack and grasped it with a strange gesture.

"O sickle wings of Velociraptor, rip and tear, fly and hunt…"

A prayer to his venerable forebears. An appeal to his ancestors.

His two scaled hands ran across the fang, imbuing it with the power of the fearsome naga. As he spoke, it grew and sharpened into a Swordclaw.

"I believe this is the length of blade you prefer. Oh, but…try not to throw it. If you can."

"I'll try."

Goblin Slayer took the proffered blade in a practiced hand. *Not bad.*

"Only…a little…longer…!"

The invisible barrier was beginning to groan under the ceaseless arrow fire.

The groan turned to a crack, and then the shield shattered into dust.

"Close your eyes and mouths, and don't breathe. Here goes!"

In the next instant, Goblin Slayer flung the egg in his left hand directly at the raft.

"GARARAOB?!"

"GRORRR?!"

Screams.

Ground-up pepper and snake bits mixed with shattered eggshell in the air. Goblins' eyes ran. They choked on the mixture and flailed about with the pain.

Slicing through the red haze, Goblin Slayer and Lizard Priest leaped aboard the ship. The raft swayed with their weight, sending one or two goblins into the muck.

A loud splash and a spray. Droplets rained down.

“Hrm.”

Goblin Slayer grunted as he laid into the creatures struggling to maintain their footing on the rocking vessel. As he did, a goblin seized the moment to grab him from behind. With his shield, he gave it a resounding smack.

Clang. “GAROU!”

“…So you have armor, do you?” Goblin Slayer spat in annoyance. Without slowing, he spun, kicking the howling goblin clear off the raft.

“GROOROB?!”

The creature struggled mightily to climb back out of the sewage, but his armor was too heavy.

Finally, the hideous face slipped beneath the surface. A few bubbles came up, and then the goblin, like a piece from a game board, was gone.

“Hmm.”

In a single motion, Goblin Slayer struck a nearby monster with the flat of his sword. The goblin and the grimy tears he had been crying went helplessly overboard.

“GAROOARA?!”

“It’s easiest just to push them off.”

“O, fearsome naga! See your child’s deeds in battle!”

Lizard Priest’s only response to Goblin Slayer was to bellow this prayer and leap at the goblins.

As the goblins began to recover their sight, they tossed their bows aside and frantically drew their swords.

But they were too slow.

They fell to claw and fang and tail, to sword and shield, fist and foot. With nimble movements and long-studied tactics, the two warriors worked their way from one end of the raft to the other.

Goblins *were* weak, after all.

In a toe-to-toe battle with experienced adventurers, the average goblin didn’t have a glimmer of a chance. A couple of the creatures jumped into the sewage in their panic. Having forgotten they couldn’t swim, they promptly drowned.

“Sixteen.”

Even so, the goblins had not lost their chief advantage.

“But we may be in difficult straits. They are many.”

Which was to say, numbers.

Where one was slain, two more appeared; where two drowned, four came forward. Four became eight. Eight became sixteen. Sixteen became thirty-two.

How many goblins could fit on the little raft?

“GOOORRB!”

“GROB! GOOBR!!”

The two adventurers met the mass of goblins and slew one after another. But there was no end to them.

Though the adventurers were more than two themselves.

“GRRB?!”

A bud-tipped arrow flew through the air.

Focused entirely on the threat in front of him, the goblin missed it until the shaft was buried in his eye and he was tumbling to the ground.

“An elf doesn’t even need her eyes open to make her shot!”

It was, of course, High Elf Archer, standing on shore.

Her ears stood straight up, and she fired arrows faster than the eye could see. Quick—so quick that everything else seemed to pale.

Among those who had words, there was none who could shoot better than an elf. Even in the furor of battle, her arrows hit only her targets. In a breath, she had emptied her quiver, but that didn’t mean she was out of arrows.

With a distasteful cluck, High Elf Archer picked up some of the goblins’ bolts from earlier.

“These things are so crude.”

But crude or no—even if the arrowheads were made of stone—the elf would not miss.

One goblin, growing impatient, picked up a bow again. He stooped down, using his friends as a shield (playing dirty, as goblins were wont to do), and readied himself to take a potshot from the shadows.

Actually, for a goblin, his aim was fairly careful.

“ORGGGG…”

His target was that impertinent little elf.

The rough bowstring made a squeaking sound as he drew it back.

An elf. And a woman, at that. It would be fun to take her alive…but then, killing her would be pleasant, too.

He'd shoot her in the eye. Or perhaps the ear? With a hideous smile, he let the arrow loose…

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak!"

It never came close to High Elf Archer, but only bounced away with a clatter.

The all-merciful Earth Mother could hardly refuse the supplication of her disciple, could she?

In the next moment, the would-be goblin archer fell prey to one of High Elf Archer's arrows and met his end.

"Thanks."

"Not at all. I have to earn my keep, too…"

High Elf Archer winked at the girl next to her. Priestess smiled stoutheartedly and held her prayer.

"I can keep them off our back row," Priestess said. "I'm counting on you to handle offense!"

"Sounds like a plan! And I have just the thing here!"

It was Dwarf Shaman who answered her, scavenging in the bag of catalysts he had so carefully conserved until that moment.

He had a handful of clay in each hand.

The edges of High Elf Archer's lips turned up in a smile, but she never looked away from the goblins' raft.

"We know already, just get on with it! Dwarves take forever to do anything!"

"Put a rock in it. You've your fighting style, and I've mine."

Dwarf Shaman began to roll each fistful of clay into a ball.

He breathed on them, mumbling something, then gave a great bellow:

"Beard-cutter, Scaly! Fall back!"

At the same moment, he pitched the dirt balls through the air. His lips overflowed with words of power.

"Come out, you gnomes, it's time to work, now don't you dare your duty shirk—a bit of dust may cause no shock, but a thousand make a lovely rock!"

As they watched, the little balls transformed into massive boulders and smashed into the boat.

Stone Blast enhanced with an influx of spiritual power to be even more impressive than usual.

"M-milord Goblin Slayer!"

"Right."

The two adventurers on the raft exchanged a quick glance, then shoved through the fleeing goblins, making a huge leap to shore.

Behind them, there was a roar, and sewage surged up like a geyser. Droplets of the filthy stuff rained down on Goblin Slayer and Lizard Priest as they rolled onto solid ground.

The raft sank to the bottom of the sewer, goblins and all. A few monsters had escaped by the skin of their teeth, but their armor dragged them down and they disappeared.

No one spoke as they watched all this happen.

The rain had never abated; it felt cold as they stood still, flushed with the heat of combat. Their breath fogged; the stench of blood and sewage rose around them.

High Elf Archer asked in a somewhat strained voice:

"So, what do we do next?"

"…Give me a break," Dwarf Shaman said morosely. He pulled out his jar of wine and undid the stopper. "That little trick just now really took it out of me."

Next to him, Priestess slid weakly to her knees.

"Let's…rest, for a moment. I need it, too…"

"No." Goblin Slayer shook his head.

Despite having just come through a pitched battle, he didn't seem to be breathing hard; he was staring squarely at the water.

"We have to move immediately."

"Hwa…?"

Priestess looked up at him vacantly.

He looked around vigilantly, still holding weapons in both hands.

"I concur." Lizard Priest nodded, making his strange hands-together gesture. "That battle was not a quiet one. Even with the rain to dampen the noise…"

Something else may have noticed us.

Just as he said this…

There was another *splash*.

High Elf Archer looked at the water with a grim expression.

"Escaped the goblins only to be caught by the wolves, have we?" She shuddered as she invoked the old proverb.

The surface of the sewage quaked; waves grew up and began rippling closer.

The next instant, huge jaws exploded out of the murky water.

“AAAAAARRRIGGGGGG!!!!”

The instant after *that*, the adventurers decided on a tactical retreat.

They ran for their lives through the rain, scattering droplets everywhere. They made their way without hesitating, despite the dimness of the sewers. This was only because they were led by High Elf Archer and Lizard Priest, whose agility helped them maneuver through the darkness and around minor obstacles. Priestess and Dwarf Shaman simply followed in their wake.

The willowy priestess and the stout dwarf were not naturally quick runners. Goblin Slayer, the lantern still hanging from his belt, protected them as they ran as fast as their feet would carry them.

Behind him, the surface of the water thrashed again.

He chanced a glance back. Massive white jaws filled his vision: long and narrow, vast, and brimming with sharp teeth. The mouth that loomed out of the darkness was more than enough to bite a person in half.

The jaws closed around empty air and sank back into the water, but they were gradually gaining ground.

“I’ve determined one thing from my observations,” Goblin Slayer said, his breathing even. “That is not a goblin.”

“I could’ve told you that!” shouted High Elf Archer, who had not looked back to see the beast for herself.

There are monsters called alligators, also known as “swamp dragons.”

Dragon is just a name; they are more closely related to lizards. They are not the creatures of legend.

They are, however, hideous: their bodies and jaws long and flat, forcing them to crawl about. Still, an alligator slicing through the water with its long tail is no laughing matter.

In this place, the white alligator hurtling toward them was more to be feared than any mythical beast.

“Hey, Scaly! Ain’t that your cousin? Do something about him!”

Dwarf Shaman was working his stubby legs as hard as he could. Spittle flew from his mouth as he shouted.

“Most unfortunately, when I entered the clergy I had to abandon all ties to my family.”

“What, don’t you ever even go home?”

“It is quite far.”

With a harsh breath, Lizard Priest took Dwarf Shaman's feet out from under him with a sweep of his tail.

"Whoooa?!" Dwarf Shaman exclaimed as his legs left the ground and floated through the air.

At about the moment he expected to be back on the ground, he found a great, scaly arm wrapped around him, holding him. Lizard Priest didn't slow for an instant as he grabbed up Dwarf Shaman and kept running.

Those unique lizardman eyes darted about.

"And to be clear, spell caster, that wyrm is no relation of mine!"

"Oh-ho! I like this! Nice and easy!"

Apparently unperturbed by his friend's remark, Dwarf Shaman rode on Lizard Priest's shoulder, laughing all the while.

"Wh-where do you think it c-came from?" Priestess asked from behind them, gasping for breath.

Praying to the gods puts a terrible strain on the soul and spirit. It is no easier than physical combat. Hence she was nearly out of breath, her feet unsteady; she felt she might fall at any moment.

Goblin Slayer gave a click of his tongue and picked her up by her narrow waist.

"Wha—?!"

"Get your breathing back under control."

Priestess yelped, startled, but after Goblin Slayer's short response, she found herself caught up under his arm.

She kicked and squirmed from embarrassment, both at their physical proximity and at being a literal burden to him.

"I—I'm all right! Y-you don't have to carry me…"

"Stop struggling. I'll drop you."

"Ohh…"

"You have one more miracle left, correct?"

It would be trouble if she collapsed here and now, his words informed her.

"I may need you to use another spell."

After a moment Priestess's cheeks flushed, and she replied quietly, "Right."

"I think we would be well-advised to get off the waterway," Lizard Priest said. Holding Dwarf Shaman on his shoulder with one hand, he reached easily into his bag with the other and pulled out the map.

He kept running, reading the map even as raindrops began to streak across it.

The damp and the rain, even the sticky air, were the friends of Lizard Priest, who had grown up deep in the jungle.

“Let’s give him the dwarf! We can get away while that monster’s having dinner!” High Elf Archer, leaping through the rain like a deer, said in apparent sincerity. “I’m sure it’ll get food poisoning!”

“As if elves were so nutritious!”

Priestess interrupted High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman, pointing ahead with her staff.

“S-something’s coming from ahead of us, too!”

High Elf Archer’s ears whipped up and down, listening closely.

Splash. Something was striking the water. Three somethings, in fact. Oars? She knew the sound.

“*More* goblins?” she said tiredly. She seemed to be feeling their earlier battle.

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Another boatful of goblins was approaching along the dim canal.

"Wh-what do we do…?" Priestess looked up at Goblin Slayer with frightened eyes.

"……"

He said nothing in response, but instead doused the light of their lantern.

"Priest," he said. "Does the path branch anywhere up ahead?"

"I assume so. These sewers are rather labyrinthine." Lizard Priest scratched a claw along the map as he answered.

"Hang on, I don't know what you're thinking, but poison gas and fire are—"

"Not allowed. I know," Goblin Slayer said to High Elf Archer. He gave a short sigh.

"We'll go with your plan."

"…?"

High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman exchanged mystified looks.

§

The goblins struggled to make their warship (or what passed for a warship among goblins) go faster. Their leader, a shaman, thrust his staff forward and, with a screech, urged his rowers to row harder.

It had been quite some time since the sounds of battle had ceased to echo through the sewers. Most likely, their comrades were already dead, but that was fine. What mattered was that the adventurers, their enemies and prey, be tired. They couldn't let this opportunity go.

The goblins were at their limit. These tunnels were pleasantly dank, but this rain was growing unbearable. Goblins couldn't care less about filth or sewage, but that doesn't mean they like being wet. They wanted a warm place to sleep. They wanted good food.

And if they had some captives to torment, so much the better. It felt like so long since they had tortured and killed those adventurers who had come into the sewers a while back.

That was why they had to seize this chance.

Maybe there would be an elf among these adventurers. Or a human. Women, perhaps. There had to be!

They sang an awful goblin song as they rowed along, completely out of sync with one another. Like many of the boats of those who had words, all hands aboard the goblin warship were soldiers. One ship might have been vulnerable. But this flotilla of three vessels would not have blinked at an entire party of novice adventurers.

Or so the goblins believed, whatever the reality might have been. And that made them dangerous. The thought that they might still be weak even in a group never once crossed their minds. Their faces twisted with desire, spittle dribbling from their mouths, they devoted themselves to rowing faster.

The eyes of the shaman, quite capable of seeing in the gloom, fixed on a single point of light—a flickering glow that could only be an adventurer's lantern. Most unfortunately, humans needed light, for the dark made them blind. In the depths of these lightless holes, the goblins were at their strongest.

Flush with the assurance of victory, they went toward the light, all unassuming.

But they didn't see any adventurers. In fact, they discovered the light was simply a reflection in the water.

"ORAGARA!"

"GORRR…"

The shaman was suspicious; he gave one of his subordinates a smack with his staff and a jabbering rebuke. The goblin, who had simply had the bad luck to be near at hand, gave the water a searching, desultory poke with his oar.

Then:

"ORAGA?!"

The goblin was missing his head.

The pale jaws of some monster exploded out of the water.

"GORARARARAB!!"

"GORRRB! GROAB!!"

The goblins set up a clamor as they rushed to their battle stations. In the grip of panic, some jumped overboard and tried to escape. Others stood and fought.

It didn't matter. The goblins closest to the water were the first to be torn to shreds.

The shaman angrily waved his staff and began to chant a spell…

§

"Looks like they have the numbers, but not the advantage," Lizard Priest observed.

"Mm. Can't say I feel sorry for them," Dwarf Shaman replied.

The adventurers watched everything from the darkness of a side path.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness."

Priestess prayed to the Earth Mother, protected from the rain by Goblin Slayer's shield. In response to her prayer, the all-compassionate goddess sent the Holy Light miracle upon the alligator's tail.

"If I can't use gas or fire or water, this is the best I can do."

Goblin Slayer sounded more than a little annoyed. Watching him wearily, High Elf Archer tried to comfort him.

"Whatever. We survived, that's what counts."

This is what adventures are supposed to be like! She sniffed and pushed out her thin chest. She was quite pleased, as was obvious from the jovial bouncing of her ears.

"I can't believe they fell for a little trick with some light, though."

"They've learned adventurers move by light."

"Really?"

"I don't know when, but at some point, it became conventional wisdom among them," Goblin Slayer said, watching the battle in the sewer unfold. "They're no more than scavengers. They have no concept of making things."

He was right. Goblins made clubs and stone tools or perhaps shaved down other equipment to fit themselves, but that was all. Items, food, livestock… They stole what they needed rather than producing it.

And why not? Villages full of stupid humans were just waiting for them to come and take anything they wanted. Since they could sate themselves through theft, there was no reason for them to do anything else. As long as they could get enough girl children and adventurers, they were set.

"Still, dull as they are, they're not foolish," Goblin Slayer continued, although he did not let his attention wander from the battle. “They learn to use items quickly. If you showed them how to build a boat, they would pick it up before long.”

“You know them pretty well,” High Elf Archer said.

“I’ve studied them closely,” Goblin Slayer replied immediately. “This is why I’m careful never to give them a new idea. I kill them instead.”

Leaning against the wall, Dwarf Shaman stroked his beard.

“What you’re saying is, someone taught them how to build those boats.”

“Yes.”

Priestess finished her prayer and let out a breath. She wiped sweat and rain from her brow.

“Are you sure? Maybe the shaman came up with them…”

“It’s possible. But if their numbers increased here naturally, then that…whatever that thing is…”

“Um…the alligator?” Priestess offered.

“…Right. That thing wouldn’t have surprised them. I don’t think they would have used boats if they’d known about it.” Muttering, he added, “Cowards to the core.”

“What is it you’re getting at, milord Goblin Slayer?” Lizard Priest asked quietly.

Goblin Slayer seemed to have something specific in mind. His response was all too pointed.

“This goblin infestation is man-made.”

Goblin Slayer waited until the sounds of battle had subsided, then suggested a temporary withdrawal.

No one objected. They were out of spells and out of arrows. They didn’t have enough items and their strength was running low. They walked silently into the dim sewers, putting the battle between the goblins and the alligator behind them.

Some time later they arrived at a ladder. They climbed to the surface only to be greeted by fat raindrops. Priestess was already soaked through, but the drops just kept coming. She turned her tired face to the sky. In a small voice, she murmured:

“It doesn’t look like the rain’s going to stop.”

INTERLUDE

Of the Young King

Very well. First, the subject of the Demon Lord, who was supposed to have been dealt with already.

The wise men are already investigating due to rumors of some undesirable elements spreading evil teachings. While we await their report, inform the rulers so we can be prepared to respond at any time should *she* reach out to us.

Next…what's this? The rising price of potions?

I see. Demand is rising and supply can't keep up. A most serious concern. As adventurers, merchants, townspeople, and indeed, monsters grow more active, we're seeing more injuries…

Very well. Open the royal herb garden to all doctors associated with or assisting free clinics.

Given what the world has come to, I suppose there's no other choice. But I shall not relax the harvesting limits. Be more alert than ever for anyone trying to harvest illegally. Deal with such people firmly but fairly, excepting cases of justified self-defense.

Next is… Hmm. This is the regular report from the Adventurers Association. This can wait.

Minister, prepare a summary of this report, highlighting only the deeds of Silver ranks and higher. Then, find someone with the time to read through it and look for anything relating to the Dark Gods or the Demon Gods.

Next…the alliance with the elves, the dwarves, and the lizardmen, is it?

Gods. Diplomacy with demi-humans… Pardon me, that's no longer polite, is it? …With *other peoples* is always such trouble. It's not that they aren't trustworthy, but their cultures are so different, and I can't have them moving freely through my territories. We'll accommodate them in every way possible, but do not let down your guard. I don't want any problems.

Yes—supplies. We mustn't forget matériel for our own troops.

How is the formation of the transport unit coming? I hear many of the lower ranks bring their own meals.

And next…proposals for dealing with goblin damage, I see.

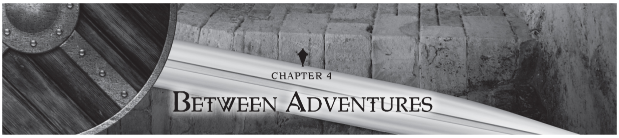
From Sword Maiden. What, *again*? I haven't enough men to send the army against every wild monster that wanders into a village. We have other problems! Dark Gods! Demon Gods! Can't they deal with goblins on their own?

Yes, such is my will on these matters… Hmm? Minister, I said that the adventurer report can wait…

……What's this? From the wise men? …

…Well, now. It seems one of them has not only found a hint of the evil ones' plans, but also is already moving to neutralize it. Ah, it's good to have help one can rely on! I think we can safely say we've seen the last of this little problem.

Why? Because a Platinum adventurer—one of our great heroes—is going to deal with it!



CHAPTER 4

Between Adventures

"Ahh…"

Priestess let a smile spread over her face as the warm steam embraced her naked, rain-chilled body.

Beyond an open door was a wide area of white marble, filled with elegant but not ostentatious carvings. The room was lined with benches to relax on amid the steam of the bath and its ever so slightly sweet aroma.

The innermost area housed a statue of the Deity of the Basin, the beautiful goddess of the bath. Water flowed continuously into the wash bucket from the mouth of, of all things, a lion. The place was utterly luxurious. The water presumably came from the rivers that ran through the entire city.

This would never have passed muster at the Temple of the Earth Mother, where adherents cherished poverty and had barely a rag to wash with. This, however, was the great bath of the Temple of Law—a steam bath. It was a fixture unique to the Temples of the Supreme God, who had commanded that those who administered the law ought to be pure of body.

And this was the most elaborate of the Temples of Law on the frontier—words could hardly describe it!

"…Right. Just for today." With one hand, Priestess held a towel to cover her lovely chest; with the other, she made the sign of the Earth Mother.

Her skin, usually covered by chain mail and a priestess's vestments, was an almost translucent white. Priestess walked into the bath buoyantly, that pale skin moistening in the steam. Thankfully no other bathers were around, in part due to the late hour, so she didn't hesitate to scoop an overflowing ladleful of water from the wash bucket.

"Oh…!"

The scent that wafted around the room came from the fragrant oils poured into the bucket.

She had not had the impulse to dress up ever since she had been moved to join the clergy, but in the back of her mind, she recalled the elegant girls they'd passed several days earlier.

"Well, I've come all the way here, after all. It's all right."

She glanced left and right, then turned toward the statue of the Deity of the Basin made of fragrant Saunastone. The statue, heated to a very high temperature, boiled water in an instant, filling the room with rose-scented steam. The goddess was depicted as a naked woman; for balance, there was a statue of an old man in the men's bath.

Or so she had heard—Priestess herself, of course, had never been in the men's bath.

The Deity of the Basin was said to tell bathers their fortunes, but she didn't have a temple of her own, nor followers. Or perhaps it could be said that every bath was her temple and every bather her disciple.

Priestess, cloaked in steam, was quite thankful to be among the deity's followers. She sat on a bench with a quiet thump. Next, she took up an accoutrement found in every bathhouse: a branch of white birch. She struck it against her body very gently, almost as if patting herself.

"Mmm…"

Her muscles, gone stiff and fatigued from long hours underground, began to relax. A few minutes later, when she had finished with the birch, her bare skin glowed a faint pink. She let out a long breath, leaning against the backrest of the long bench.

"Everyone else should've come with me…"

She'd asked if the elf wanted to come but had gotten a vigorous shake of the head in response.

"It's like…the spirits of fire and water and air are all mixed up together. I don't like it much."

The dwarf and the lizardman had expressed a preference for wine and food over baths and headed off into town.

And then there was Goblin Slayer.

He had said something odd about sending a letter and shortly after was nowhere to be found.

"Oh! I'll come, too!" High Elf Archer had said and gone after him, and Priestess couldn't say she didn't understand how the archer felt.

Sir Goblin Slayer…

Yes, he was the one that Priestess's thoughts settled on.

"Gosh… It's been half a year already…"

Half a year since she had nearly died in that goblin den. Since he had saved her life.

Even now, she had dreams of that adventure. Sometimes she saw herself not as she was, but as one of the girls kidnapped by the goblins. Sometimes she had a fleeting dream that she and the other three novices had come through the adventure safely.

Both had been within the realm of possibility for her.

What should she have done—that day, that hour? What was she supposed to have done?

If.

If she had finished her first adventure successfully…

She certainly wouldn't know any of the friends she had now. And then what would have happened in their fight in the underground ruins or with the goblin lord?

What would have happened to the city, the people on the farm, all her friends, everyone she knew, all of the adventurers? And him—Goblin Slayer? Would he have survived?

Priestess was not egotistical enough to believe she had saved his life, but…

"He's not such a bad person."

She brushed her hand over her waist, where he'd wrapped his arm around her not long before. Compared to his arm, hers looked thin and fragile. He looked like a hero—and sometimes an avenging demon—but he was probably neither of those things.

"……"

At some point, Priestess had pulled her feet up onto the bench and curled up in a ball. Her head was pleasantly floaty from the steam, and thought after thought drifted through it like bubbles on the surface of the water. Surrendering herself to them, she felt an unusual combination of comfort and impatience.

It was like waking up earlier than usual on a day when she didn't have to work. She could just fall asleep like this. But maybe it would be better for her to get up and move. She had to do something. She felt there was something she had to do…

"What should I do…?"

"About what?"

"Yikes!"

When a gentle voice answered her dejected mumble, Priestess jumped up so quickly the bubbles went scattering everywhere. Her eyes darted up to see a body as plump as ripe fruit.

"Hee-hee. The blood's going to rush to your head at that rate."

"P-pardon me, I was just thinking aloud…"

Priestess hurriedly bowed her head to the archbishop standing before her—Sword Maiden.

"That's quite all right," she said, with a shake of her head that sent long waves through her beautiful golden hair. "On the contrary, I apologize for startling you. My duties kept me late…"

Priestess found herself charmed by the woman. She didn't wear so much as a thread of clothing, but she did not try to cover herself, nor show any concern at her nakedness. She was so well-endowed not even a woman could quite bring herself to look away. Her sole covering, the cloth over her eyes, somehow only made her more alluring. The atmosphere was almost reverent: Her body, dappled in sunlight and shadow, made her look different and freshly beautiful at every moment. What was more, steam on her body brought out the flush in her skin, such that even Priestess found herself swallowing heavily.

But…

"Um… Are those…?"

Priestess's voice faltered.

Faint white lines ran along Sword Maiden's otherwise perfect body. Many, many of them layered upon one another. Some narrow, some thick, long and short. Some ran straight as an arrow, while others made patterns as though they had been tugged and pulled. The slight pink tinge to her skin made them stand out all the more.

Tattoos? No, they couldn't be. These were…

"Oh, these…"

The archbishop traced a crooked line that ran across her arm with a slim white finger. As her fingertip pressed into the soft flesh, she almost seemed to be stroking it lovingly.

Priestess had only seen these in books, but still she looked down self-consciously. She couldn't bring herself to keep looking at them.

"The marks of a mistake."

Sword Maiden smiled, speaking of the scars all over her body as though they were hardly worth noticing. The expression seemed to bubble up of its own volition.

"They hit me on the head, from behind… That was more than ten years ago now."

"Oh, um, I…"

Priestess understood now all too well what that meant. What should she say? How should she say it? Her voice grew strained, and she didn't look at the other woman.

"Are you…all right…now?"

Sword Maiden stopped moving for just a second. If her eyes hadn't been hidden, surely Priestess would have seen her blink. "You're quite a kind person, aren't you?" she said softly, and her expression faded until she looked like a carving. "Most, when I tell them, say that they're sorry."

"I—I just…"

…*couldn't think of anything else to say*, Priestess thought, but the words caught in her throat.

She could hardly say that to Sword Maiden.

"Hee-hee… You shouldn't worry."

Sword Maiden reached out and picked up the birch branch. Her movements were so elegant and precise one would never have thought her eyes were covered. Then, she slapped the branch against herself like a whip, a soft "Mm!" escaping her lips. Priestess averted her eyes, but couldn't help glancing, glancing, glancing.

Sword Maiden finally stopped working herself over with the branch, as if she knew Priestess was watching.

"With these eyes…," Sword Maiden murmured and put her face close to Priestess's.

Priestess gulped quietly.

"With these eyes, I see many things… A great many things."

Priestess let out a single strangled breath through her nose. A mildly drunk feeling came over her, not unlike when she had smelled the sweet, flowery aroma.

"Things you cannot imagine…"

"Oh…"

Then, just like that, Sword Maiden left the overawed Priestess and withdrew into the billowing steam of the bath. She cloaked herself in the clouds like a shy girl. The ripples of her flaxen hair were merely shadows now.

"That man with you…"

"What…?"

Priestess shook her head to clear the warm fog from her mind.

"Goblin Slayer—isn't that what he called himself? He seems a most…reliable person."

"Oh, uh, ahem… Yes. He really is."

Priestess had the innocent look of a child revealing a treasure. The edges of Sword Maiden's lips turned up ever so slightly in an enchanting smile.

"I am most glad that your investigations seem to be proceeding smoothly.

"But…," she added, with candidness reminiscent of *him*. "…No doubt one day he, too, will disappear."

Priestess swallowed gently.

She sees me.

She could feel those sightless eyes on her; it made her skin tingle. Sword Maiden's eyes were covered. And yet, Priestess felt Sword Maiden was looking straight through her, into the depths of her heart…

"U-um, I—I…!"

"Yes. Best get out of the bath before you get light-headed."

Priestess had stood without realizing it. Sword Maiden gave her a long, slow nod, and Priestess fled the bath, stumbling slightly on the slick white floors, desperate to escape that gaze.

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She didn't quite know how she had managed to dry herself or put on her nightclothes after she got to the changing room. She only knew that suddenly, she was standing in the hallway of the Temple of Law, the night breeze blowing around her.

Sometime during the evening, the rain had abated, revealing a starry sky, beautiful and cold. The twin moons seemed to cast a chill, even though it was summer. Looking at them, Priestess hugged her shoulders and shivered.

She knows.

It came like a flash of insight, like a revelation.

That woman knows.

Knows what?

About the goblins.

She felt a chill in her heart far greater than the one on her skin.

§

"Whoop, this is it."

Orcbolg—that is, Goblin Slayer—had said they should meet at the Adventurers Guild.

It was, of course, next to the town gate—larger than the guild in their frontier town but smaller than the Temple of Law. It had an administrative office, tavern, and inn, along with a manufactory and sundry among other amenities. All like the guild back home, but this one was quite different in appearance.

It was built of white stone, which lent it an air of tranquillity. It looked like it could have been a bank. Not that High Elf Archer had ever been to a bank. What struck her instead was the sheer size of the place.

"Whoa, look over there. That's a high elf…!"

"No way. I've never seen one before!"

"Whoo! What a specimen! And I *don't* just mean as an elf!"

She had been to this city before, but the nearby adventurers still watched her with fascination. Their mouths said whatever they wanted, and their eyes bored into her with stares of curiosity or lust.

"……"

High Elf Archer furrowed her brow very slightly. It had never bothered her before, but she had grown used to her comfortable life in the frontier town.

This is kind of…upsetting.

Maybe it was because unlike the little frontier town, this was a big, advanced city.

There were a great many adventurers milling about. High Elf Archer looked around with a flick of her ears.

"Let's see, where's Orcbolg…? Ah, there he is!"

There was no mistaking that cheap-looking helmet and grimy armor. Goblin Slayer was sitting heavily on a bench in a corner of the room, arms crossed. It was how he always sat, if not the usual place he would be. But there were other things that were different from usual.

A party whispered together, clearly mocking him. Perhaps they thought he couldn't hear them, but to High Elf Archer's long ears their voices were as clear as if they'd been shouting.

"Geez, what's with the filth?"

"Yeah, what river'd he wash up from? Gimme a break. We've got standards around here!"

High Elf Archer glared at them and gave a "hmph." She didn't like anything about this. She walked through the hall toward the bench, as if wading through the adventurers' stares, and deliberately stomped along in a way quite at odds with her usual silent footsteps.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Orcbolg."

Then, she sat down next to him—*right* next to him. She cuddled up to his side. Like a cat, she watched an excited mutter run through the rabble of adventurers and smiled. That'd show them. High Elf Archer chuckled under her breath.

"Sorry. I kinda fell asleep. Were you able to send your letter?"

"Yes," he answered blandly.

Well, it didn't seem like he was mad at her for oversleeping. That helped her relax just a bit. She didn't have to worry about it, either, then.

Whether or not he knew what she was thinking, he showed his receipt to High Elf Archer. It boasted a wax seal indicating the letter had been accepted.

"I found an adventurer going the right way, so I asked him to do it. I've already paid him, as well."

There was a post system—anywhere the roads went, a post-horse could go. Most mail went that way, but with a bit of money, you could also hire an adventurer.

After all, adventurers were just roughnecks with armor, weapons, and strength. If you paid them enough, they'd see your letter got to its destination—especially handy in emergencies or if the letter had to reach some remote place the postal system couldn't go. And if you filed the quest through the guild, they would confirm when it was completed. That helped prevent couriers from running away with your item or just throwing a letter away and pretending they'd delivered it.

Of course, one would never entrust an unknown young tough, however strong he was, with an important delivery. One of the advantages of the guild ranking system was knowing who to trust with your packages.

"Come to think of it, I've never written a letter," High Elf Archer said, adding a "hmm" as she looked intently at the quest form. "What'd you write? Reporting back that you made it here safe?"

"Yes, in a way."

Uh-huh…

She was pretty sure she understood, and it brought a slight blush to her cheeks. High Elf Archer all but tossed the receipt back at him. *He must have written to that farm girl. I'm sure of it.* "Gosh, Orcbolg, so you *do* have a soft side."

"Do I?"

"Sure do."

"Really…"

Uh-huh, uh-huh. High Elf Archer's ears bounced up and down happily; she was quite taken with the conclusion she'd jumped to.

"Okay!" She hopped off the bench, feeling renewed.

Her hair blew behind her as she stretched, trailing through the air like a shooting star.

"You needed to do some shopping, Orcbolg? A weapon or something?"

"Yes."

Goblin Slayer nodded, then stood slowly. He tapped his hip with one hand. He indicated the scabbard, often occupied by his sword with its strange length or some primitive, stolen armament. During the previous day's adventure, his usual willingness to unflinchingly throw away his weapons had left it empty.

“I don’t trust a dagger… You’ll buy clothes?”

“Sure. That sewage really stinks. I’d hate for the stench to get stuck on me…” *You’re the only one who doesn’t seem to notice.* High Elf Archer narrowed her eyes at him. “You dousing me in goblin guts was way worse, though.”

“Erk…” Goblin Slayer groaned quietly, still standing there in front of her. “…If it upset you that much, should I apologize?”

“Go ahead. I don’t care.” She gave a light, easy wave of her hand. Perfectly calm. “I guess if you apologized, I could probably stop bringing it up.”

“…I see.”

His response, of course, was the same as always.

So was the atmosphere in the Guild Hall. The mob of adventurers, of staff, all were looking at them with curiosity. And some, perhaps, with envy. *What’s a high elf doing with a vagabond like that?* Everyone had their own theory: There was some mistake, or someone was being had. So on and so forth.

“I noticed,” Goblin Slayer said quietly, and every ear in the room tried to catch what came next, “that despite the sewers here, there are no giant rat–slaying quests.”

“Huh. Now that you mention it, I guess you’re right.”

As she craned her neck to look at the quest board, High Elf Archer happened to notice some snickers. Even if they didn’t speak, their expressions said it all. *Country boy.* She could see them looking almost straight down their noses. *You think there’d be rats in our sewers? In a town this nice?*

But High Elf Archer only gave a happy little chuckle and looked around the room.

“Well, shall we go?”

When, with a smirk, she took Goblin Slayer’s hand, the mutter became a roar. She enjoyed that more than she could say. The sensation of his rough leather glove in her hand was novel, too, and her smile only broadened.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

They were soon back on the road she had come down shortly before, heading back toward town.

“What?”

“Do you need underwear under there?” *I’ve always wondered.*

Goblin Slayer gave an unusually deep sigh at her words.

"Don't ask me."

High elves would ask what they liked, of course, and she paid scant heed to his reaction. Holding his gloved hand with a kind of fascination, she glanced at his face.

"So. Just a sword you needed, Orcbolg?"

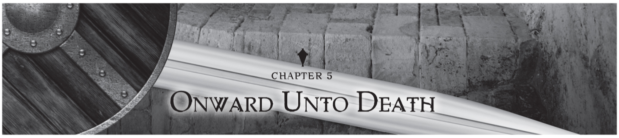
"No. Some other things, too."

"Hmm."

High Elf Archer thought back to everything in Goblin Slayer's item pouch.

All the items she couldn't identify, all the things she'd never seen. All the equipment she would like to know the feel of. An irresistible curiosity bubbled up in her little chest, and without a hint of reluctance, she smiled and asked:

"Whatcha gonna buy?"



CHAPTER 5

ONWARD UNTO DEATH

“So, what’s with that thing, anyway?”

The next day, back in the sewers once more, the elf was looking at Goblin Slayer with one hand on her hip. He had a new sword on his belt, oddly sized of course, and a small cage hung next to the scabbard.

Inside, a little bird with light green feathers chirped cheerily. The sound seemed out of place in the polluted sewers.

Goblin Slayer gave her a puzzled look.

“You don’t know this bird?”

“Of course I do.”

“It’s a canary.”

“I said I know that,” High Elf Archer replied, ears back.

Beside her, Dwarf Shaman tried to hold back a chuckle.

“You’ve been upset about this since last night, haven’t you?” the dwarf said.

“Doesn’t it bother you? It’s a bird! A little canary!”

They proceeded slowly and quietly into the sewers, through the dark, but her anger wouldn’t cool. Her long ears, perfect for scouting, bounced restlessly up and down. For a second, her almond-shaped eyes darted to Goblin Slayer behind her.

“Well, it’s not going to destroy us if we touch it, right? Like your scroll?”

“Do you believe canaries are fatal to people?”

High Elf Archer’s ears gave a great jump, and Dwarf Shaman managed to let only a low chuckle escape him.

“G-Goblin Slayer, sir, I don’t think that’s what she meant…,” Priestess broke in, unable to let this pass.

She shuffled along in the middle of their line, holding her staff with both hands.

“What?”

Goblin Slayer looked back, and she found herself staring at his metal helmet. She was suddenly lost for words.

It had been one night since the bath. She hadn't slept a wink, but when she had gotten up in the morning…nothing. Maybe all her nervousness had simply given her a strange fit of the imagination.

Sword Maiden had appeared at breakfast and said a word of thanks to the party as she passed by. All hint of the previous night's indecency had vanished from her bearing, as if it had never been there.

Yes…I'm sure it's nothing. It was always nothing.

Just a mistake on her part. Of course it was. It had to be…

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing…"

Priestess went stiff at Goblin Slayer's brief, quiet question. She exhaled gently.

"That is, what I mean is, why *did* you bring a canary with us?"

She glanced toward the birdcage. The grass-colored creature was hopping happily up and down on a branch.

"I mean, it's cute, but…"

The man in front of her was Goblin Slayer. He was not one to be frivolous or irrational when it came to killing goblins.

"Canaries make noise when they sense poisonous gas."

"Poisonous gas…?"

Goblin Slayer nodded, explaining in his typical dispassionate tone:

"The goblins in this nest are educated. It would not surprise me if they had set traps such as you might find in old ruins."

"Come to think of it, don't human miners use birds to detect bad air underground?" Dwarf Shaman gave a knowing nod, holding his bag of catalysts. "All things considered, dwarves are less worried about poisonous gas than we are about dragons coming after our treasure."

"Oh, really?" High Elf Archer smirked as she peeked around the corner, then motioned the others to follow her.

Goblin Slayer went after her, taking slow, careful steps. He had one hand on his sword. The other held the torch, and his shield was mounted on his arm. Just as always.

"I heard once of a dwarf kingdom that was destroyed when they dug up some underground demons," Goblin Slayer said.

"…Well, that's bound to happen once in a while," Dwarf

Shaman said morosely and then fell quiet. It seemed Goblin Slayer had struck a nerve.

It has always been the way of things for countries to fall, prosper, war, and fall again for every kind of reason. The world has never lacked for lands both rich and ruined.

"I see," said Lizard Priest, his tail waving behind him. "And if I may ask, milord Goblin Slayer, where did you come by such knowledge?"

"A coal miner," he said, as if it were obvious. "There are many in this world who know much that I do not."

After a few minutes' walking, they came to a dead end, though not a natural one. The path was blocked by a waterway as wide as a stream, and something had destroyed or swept away the stone bridge that had once crossed it.

High Elf Archer stuck her thumb up and held out her arm, eyeballing the distance.

"We might be able to jump it, if we had to."

"Any other routes?" asked Goblin Slayer.

"Let us see…" There was a rustling sound as Lizard Priest unfolded the old map. The ancient drawing was covered in a variety of newer marks, reflecting the adventurers' discoveries. He traced waterways and passages with his claw, then gave a slow shake of his head.

"This large waterway appears to bisect everything. Although there is a possibility one of the other bridges is intact."

"A thin hope." With some surprise, Dwarf Shaman leaned out over the water and poked at the broken stone.

"Whoa, don't fall in," High Elf Archer said, grabbing him by the belt.

"Sorry… Mm. This is the work of many a flood over many a long year. It didn't wash away just yesterday." So muttering, Dwarf Shaman came back to the hallway. He showed everyone a bit of debris he'd collected, then crushed it in his hand.

"I'd be willing to guess the other bridges are in more or less the same condition."

"Then, we jump," Goblin Slayer said without hesitation. "First one over carries a rope. A lifeline."

"I—I have a rope," Priestess said gallantly and pulled a coil of rope, complete with grappling hook, out of her bag.

It was just like her that it should be neatly rolled up. And it was a testament to her real strength that it appeared never to have been used.

“Ah, the Adventurer’s Toolkit,” High Elf Archer said fondly as she narrowed her eyes and peeked into Priestess’s bag.

It was a bit of equipment aimed at novice adventurers, containing everything they might need on the job. Rope with grappling hook, several lengths of chain, and a mallet. Tinderbox. Backpack and waterskin. Eating utensils, chalk, a dagger, etc.

“You’d be surprised how useless most of that stuff is. Grappling hook excepted.”

“But when you go adventuring, you shouldn’t leave without them.”

“Huh,” High Elf Archer breathed, then grabbed the end of the rope that didn’t have a hook. She took one or two steps back, then ran as lightly as a deer.

“So, Orcbolg.”

She leaped and landed on the far side without a sound, then tied the rope to one of her arrows and stuck it in between the flagstones.

“What about that Gate scroll? You learn that from someone, too?”

“I heard once of someone who tried to use Gate to go to a sunken ruin, and the water killed them.”

That woman—that is, Witch back at the Adventurers Guild—must have told him the story.

At a signal from High Elf Archer, Goblin Slayer grabbed the grappling hook and jumped across. He made a heavy, dull sound on landing, as one might expect from a person in full armor.

“Impressive,” he said as he handed the hook back to High Elf Archer, who tossed it back to the far side.

“You really will do anything to kill goblins, won’t you?”

“Of course,” was all he said.

He must have decided the interview was over, because he fell silent and began looking all around the hall.

“Can you jump, lass? I’ll be getting Scaly’s help myself…”

“Oh, right. Well, um, I’m next, I guess.”

At the urging of Dwarf Shaman, Priestess, who had been gazing around somewhat vacantly, hurriedly picked up the hook. She stepped back for a running start, then jumped across with a little shout, her expression darkening just a bit.

He set traps and killed children without hesitation; he was clever and merciless. To her, he looked very much like a goblin. Maybe he knew that better than anyone.

No doubt one day he, too, will disappear.

The thick, honeyed voice came unbidden to her mind, ran through it like a river before slowly fading away.

§

Their investigation of the sewers went more smoothly than it had the day before. This was partly because they had a better grasp of the pathways, but more than that, they had changed their philosophy.

Goblin Slayer had determined to completely avoid any encounters with goblins. He walked with his unconcerned stride, holding the torch and sneaking along like a cat. High Elf Archer seemed to be taking after him; her footfalls were as light as a feather. Sometimes they would slip past goblin patrols; at others, they chose routes with no goblins.

Priestess, Dwarf Shaman, and Lizard Priest followed after them through the hallways.

“I never thought I’d see the day when you would let a goblin go, Orcbolg,” High Elf Archer whispered.

“I am not letting them go,” he replied, pressing himself against the wall and peeking around a corner. “First, we cut off the head. We slaughter the rest after that.”

“I wonder if it’s another goblin lord or ogre,” Priestess murmured anxiously, but Goblin Slayer only shook his head and said, “I don’t know.”

Goblins were at the bottom of the monster hierarchy. Almost any kind of creature might be leading them. A dark elf, some kind of demon, even a dragon…

“I suppose it will do us no good to stand here wondering about it.” Lizard Priest took the folded-up map from his bag and opened it nimbly with his claws. Thanks to his excellent night vision, inherited from his forebears, he could read it even without a light.

“I should think we have not yet glimpsed even the shadow of the tail of the one who is behind this.”

“What you mean,” said Dwarf Shaman, “is that we’ve got to keep heading farther in.”

“Farther upriver, to be precise.” Goblin Slayer had stood and was holding the torch over the map to read it. He traced a path with one leather-gloved finger. It followed the waterway up, past the site of their random battle the previous day.

“Their boats came from farther up the river of sewage. It’s safe to assume they have a base somewhere in that direction.”

“If we keep going upriver…that means we’ll end up off this map, right?” Priestess’s white finger followed Goblin Slayer’s along the paper.

The map Sword Maiden had given them was only of the city sewers, after all. It showed only a fraction of the vast ruins that sprawled beneath the water town.

“Will we be all right?”

“We won’t do anything foolish.”

Priestess adjusted her grip on her staff, unable to calm herself, but Goblin Slayer was decisive.

It wasn’t clear whether that was out of consideration for her. But at the sight of his unchanging countenance, Priestess’s tense cheeks relaxed, and she smiled.

“Right, that’s right. Let’s not do anything foolish or silly.”

She held her staff firmly, forced her knees not to shake, and looked ahead.

“Upriver, huh? That’ll be this way.” High Elf Archer went on, ears bouncing, without a moment’s reluctance, and the rest of the party followed.

A short while later, just as they reached the very edge of their map, the air changed noticeably. The simple stone hall gave onto a gallery covered in wall paintings. The moss-covered pavement became cracked marble. Even the water went from polluted to clear. This was obviously not a sewer anymore.

“There are traces of soot here.”

Goblin Slayer, studying the wall paintings intently, held the torch aloft and pointed at a spot near the ceiling.

High Elf Archer stood on her tiptoes to get a look.

“You mean there used to be lights?”

“A very long time ago.” Goblin Slayer nodded, wiping a bit of soot from his finger. “Goblins have excellent night vision. They don’t use lights.”

“Hmm…”

Lizard Priest leaned toward the wall and gave one of the paintings a thoughtful scratch with his claw. Humans, elves, dwarves, rheas, lizardmen, beastmen—every race who had words was depicted in full equipment, the old and the young, men and women.

"Warriors or soldiers…no."

Their outfits were not uniform enough to be soldiers. Mercenaries, perhaps, or…

"Adventurers."

"I have heard it used to be quite lively around these parts," Dwarf Shaman said, standing to one side and following the brushstrokes closely with his eyes. The paint, weathered over many long years, flaked off at the slightest touch. "This style of painting hasn't been current for four, five hundred years now."

"Oh," said Priestess, looking up and around, "could this be…"

The carefully constructed gallery. The painted figures. The clear water. It felt much like a place she knew very well. Tranquil, quiet—not to be trespassed upon. Not a temple…

"…a graveyard, perhaps?"

Catacombs.

That's what this was; she was convinced. She brushed the paintings—the people—with her delicate hand. They were those who had fought on the side of order in the Age of the Gods—and this was their resting place. She sank to her knees in mourning for all those who had come before and clung to her staff.

High Elf Archer stood above Priestess as she prayed for the repose of these souls, as if guarding her. Her shoulders slumped.

"It's a goblin nest now."

Her words evoked a twinge of sorrow as they echoed for a moment and then faded away. For the elves, who lived thousands of years, even the Age of the Gods did not seem so long ago. Or perhaps she was moved to be standing amid the graves of the warriors her mother and father had told her about in stories.

"'Even the brave are at last brought low,' huh…?"

"That doesn't matter now."

Goblin Slayer cut off the girls' somber ruminations. He quickly scanned the area, and when he was satisfied there was no immediate threat of goblins, he set off at a brisk trot.

The reaction was very much like him. High Elf Archer and Priestess looked at each other.

"What do you think about that?"

"I guess…he's still our Goblin Slayer."

Priestess's reply was a mixture of resignation and fondness.

High Elf Archer stood gracefully and walked after the warrior; Priestess scurried behind them both.

"Hrm. No one ever accused Beard-cutter of excessive patience." Dwarf Shaman followed next with a huff. "You'll probably scare those little devils off just by showing up."

"That would be a problem," Goblin Slayer said quietly. "I hate it when they run."

The party smiled wanly at his overly serious response, and the adventure was back underway—into the catacombs.

Everything about the architecture here was different from the sewers. The path twisted confusingly, turning back on itself, branching off, like a maze. From above, the catacombs might have appeared like a spider's web.

"They must be built like this to confuse any monsters that wander in, keep them from disturbing the dead warriors," Dwarf Shaman explained with an impressed whistle. Even the dwarves' best stonemasons would not have found it a simple matter to create halls like these. "To wander this place as a lost spirit…that'd be a cruel fate."

"Yes, for it removes one from the round of death and rebirth," Lizard Priest said. "But this place has already fallen into the hands of the goblins."

There was no doubting the place had become a seedbed for chaos.

"Above all…," muttered Lizard Priest, adding a few strokes of charcoal to the sheepskin paper, "the drawing of a map cannot be done halfheartedly. Each of us must remain vigilant."

"Well, this room first, I guess."

Holding her staff with both hands, Priestess looked up at the thick, heavy door. It was the ebony of the night sky, worked with a border of gold, and it seemed to defy the flow of time. Miraculously for being in such a damp place, the door showed no sign of rot or wear. It was clearly enchanted with some age-old magic. Other than a touch of rust around the keyhole, there was not a scratch on it.

"It's not locked," High Elf Archer said. "And there don't seem to be any traps—at least not on the door itself." She finished inspecting the keyhole, nodded slightly, and stepped to the side.

“This isn’t my specialty, though. So don’t blame me if things go wrong.”

“Here goes,” Goblin Slayer declared, then kicked in the door of the burial chamber.

The adventurers tumbled into the room like an avalanche.

Once they were all inside, Dwarf Shaman pounded a wedge under the door to hold it open. He always kept the tool on hand against any unexpected situations, and the easy way he used it suggested long familiarity.

Lizard Priest kept his weapon up to protect Dwarf Shaman from any ambush. While the dwarf worked, it was High Elf Archer’s job to search the room.

The burial chamber was about ten feet square, floored with nine tiles in rows of three. High Elf Archer spun around to scan the room, an arrow ready in her bow…

“Look at that!”

“How awful…!”

High Elf Archer and Priestess both swallowed heavily, expressions of open disgust on their faces.

The room was empty save for several stone coffins. In the center, a shape came into view in the faint light of the torch. Someone was tied up, spread-eagled as if to deliberately expose them.

The shape appeared to be a human figure, head hung in exhaustion—a woman with long hair. She wore faded metal armor. Perhaps she was one of the adventurers who had gone before them and had not returned.

“Goblin Slayer, sir!”

“No other choice…”

With Goblin Slayer’s permission, Priestess ran up to the captive woman.

She knelt and asked, “Hello? Hello? Are you all right?” There was no answer.

The woman didn’t even look in Priestess’s direction. Her head simply hung there.

Had she lost all strength? Or was she…?

“…! I—I’ll try to heal you…!”

Priestess pushed aside her fears of the worst and began to pray to the Earth Mother for healing.

“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, lay your revered hand upon

—”

With a soft swish, the woman’s hair fell to the ground, right in front of Priestess as she raised her hands to invoke the miracle.

Empty eyes stared up at her.

It was a person.

Was.

A dusty skeleton, dressed in the skin of a woman who had presumably been flayed alive.

“It’s wrong! This…this is all wrong!”

Priestess gave a choked scream.

At the same instant, the entryway sealed with a crash.

The wedge clattered across the floor, mocking them.

“Hrr—!”

Lizard Priest immediately charged the door with his shoulder, but it didn’t budge.

“This is trouble! I think the door has been barred!”

“Come here, Scaly! Maybe you and I together…!”

Lizard Priest and Dwarf Shaman slammed into the door with all their might. It groaned, but didn’t give. It showed no sign of opening at all.

“GROOROOROROB!!”

“GORB!! GORRRRB!!”

Cackling voices echoed from the other side of the stone wall, mocking the adventurers’ futile struggles.

High Elf Archer bit her lip.

“Goblins…!”

“So they got us,” Goblin Slayer spat in annoyance.

They should have expected it. The goblins could hardly miss a party of adventurers trespassing in their home.

Cornering cautious prey was difficult. It was much easier to ambush them—to set a trap. The goblins knew no adventurer would leave a woman in trouble.

Every once in a while, all the cruel wit in their little heads could outfox even a human. This, along with their fertility, was what had allowed them to survive for so long.

“No…!”

They were trapped. The reality of it rendered Priestess speechless. Her knees shook, her teeth chattered, and she thought her legs might give out. The tragedy of that first adventure sprang to life in her mind.

“Calm down.”

The rebuke was as dispassionate as ever. It wasn’t meant to support her in her fear, but break through it. She nodded fiercely, as if clinging to his words. Her face was pale, and something gleamed at the corners of her eyes. If he hadn’t been there or if she had been alone, she surely would have fainted.

And that would have meant death—or something far worse.

But beside her stood Goblin Slayer, his guard up, his weapon at the ready.

“We’re still alive.”

The canary began to twitter noisily.

§

“Gas!”

No one was sure who said it first.

“GROB! GORRB!!”

“GROOROB! GORRRB!!”

The tweeting of the canary mingled with the screeching laughter of the goblins on the other side of the door.

A white mist had begun to seep into the room through several holes that had been bored in the walls. The adventurers packed into the center of the burial chamber as though surrounded. They were certainly in dire straits.

“We’re in trouble now. They’ll finish us all in one fell swoop.”

“Not all gas is deadly… But I’m sure it means us nothing good, whatever the case.”

Lizard Priest clucked his tongue, and Dwarf Shaman groaned and wiped sweat from his brow. His eyes had happened upon the awful skeleton in the woman’s skin.

Looking all around the room in desperation, hoping to find an escape route, High Elf Archer gave a cry.

“It’s no good! There’s no other way out!”

“What…are we going…to do, Goblin Slayer, sir…?”

Priestess still had not received the Cure miracle, which could neutralize poison, and even its effects would only last for a short while. When it wore off, that would be the end. With no idea how long the gas would keep coming, all she could do was to buy them a little time.

Priestess looked imploringly at Goblin Slayer, her eyes bright with tears.

He made no response.

"Goblin Slayer? Sir?"

"……"

He was rummaging silently in his bag.

As Priestess watched, he pulled out a black mass and thrust it at her.

"Wrap this in a hand cloth, and put it over your mouth and nose."

"Is this—charcoal?"

"It will protect you somewhat from poisonous gas. If you have any medicinal herbs with you, put them in the cloth, too. Quickly, if you don't want to die."

"Yes, sir!"

Priestess hurriedly took the charcoal and sat down in place to dig through her own items. When she had pulled out six clean hand cloths, she found a scaled arm reaching over from beside her.

"Let me help you. Toxic vapors do not much affect me."

"Th-thank you…!"

The two of them quickly began to wrap charcoal and herbs in each of the cloths, making simple gas masks. Priestess continued to prepare cloths for her companions as Lizard Priest wrapped one around her face.

"Goblin Slayer, sir!"

"Thanks."

"Here, take these, too…!"

Two gas masks, one made with a larger cloth. He seemed to guess what she had in mind; he immediately wrapped the large cloth around the birdcage. Then, he pushed his own mask through the visor of his helmet and began digging through his bag again. It was full of objects none of the others could identify.

"Gods. You have everything but the kitchen washbasin in there, don't you?" Dwarf Shaman said as he struggled to try to fit his beard into the cloth Priestess had given him.

"Only the minimum," Goblin Slayer replied, grabbing two bags from the mess of items. "I wanted to bring masks such as doctors use when treating the Black Death, but they're too bulky."

"So, just what do you have in mind, Beard-cutter?" The dwarf seemed to be grinning gallantly under his mask.

Goblin Slayer tossed one of the bags to him. Dwarf Shaman scrambled to catch it, then gave a questioning look at its unexpected heaviness.

"What have we here?"

"Quicklime and volcanic soil." Goblin Slayer was as dispassionate as ever. "Mix them together and plug the holes."

Dwarf Shaman suddenly slapped his knees. Even with the mask, his grin was evident.

"Concrete!"

"It won't dry very quickly," Goblin Slayer said, but he nodded, and Dwarf Shaman thumped himself on the chest.

"What are you worried about, Beard-cutter? I've got the Weathering spell!"

At that, High Elf Archer swiped the bag from Dwarf Shaman's hand.

"Hey, long-ears, what are you doing?"

Above her gas mask, her eyes narrowed, and her ears flicked.

"I'll seal the holes, dwarf. You cast your spell!"

"Well said!" His quick response was like a mallet striking a nail.

He and High Elf Archer began zipping around the room. High Elf Archer would spread concrete wherever she found a hole, and Dwarf Shaman would reach out his hand.

"Ticktock says the clock, its hands never stop. Pendulum, swing—time's the thing!"

He finished with a great shout and a gust of breath, and the muddy compound hardened in the blink of an eye.

Lizard Priest rolled his eyes in his head at the sight.

"Mm. Your wiles are many, master spell caster."

He worked his jaw up and down. It was covered in a cloth, which was not quite long enough; it had been supplemented with a bandage. His voice was muffled but otherwise sounded normal; if anything, he seemed quite at ease. For a lizardman who had grown up in the jungles of the south, the battlefield was like a second home.

"Did you have a next step in mind, then, milord Goblin Slayer?"

"We move one of the coffins in front of the door as a barricade," Goblin Slayer said evenly. He sounded no different than usual; he didn't seem the least bit excited. "When the gas clears, they'll come in."

"Oh, I—I'll help!"

Priestess hurried to clean up her items and stood.

Goblin Slayer nodded in reply, and Lizard Priest went up to a coffin at random.

Priestess came to his side. Could they really move it? They had no choice.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Goblin Slayer said.

“Together, then.” From behind them, Lizard Priest placed his massive arms against the stone.

“One… Two…”

“Hrr!”

“Hnnn!”

Along with the warrior and the priest, Priestess leaned in with all the strength in her willowy body. Her slim arms and supple flesh were almost nothing compared to her companions. Even so, she pushed against the coffin with all her might, sweat beading on her face.

“Hn! Hrrnnn!”

At some point, she stopped shaking.

Soon, she heard a sharp cracking sound, and the coffin slowly began to move.

It left white scratches on the floor as they pushed it along, finally shoving it up against the door with a crash.

Lizard Priest gave it two or three more pushes before he nodded in satisfaction.

“This will do nicely.”

“We’re finished, too!”

High Elf Archer came bounding back toward Lizard Priest.

Dwarf Shaman moved at a stagger, wiping sweat off his forehead.

“So are my spells, unfortunately.”

“Pick up a weapon, then.” Goblin Slayer pulled a dagger from its sheath.

He took the birdcage, where the canary had finally settled down, and set it in the middle of the room. He then checked the state of his shield and bag and readied himself to fight at any moment.

“Oh-ho. Shan’t want for ammunition around here,” Dwarf Shaman said, pulling out his sling. He collected a bunch of pebbles from the ground and slipped them into his pocket. High Elf Archer took her cue from them, checking her bow and making sure the string was tight.

“Shall I summon a Dragontooth Warrior?”

“How about Protection…?”

“Please.”

At Goblin Slayer’s response, the two clergy members began their prayers to their respective patrons.

“O horns and claws of our father, Iguanodon, thy four limbs, become two legs to walk upon the earth.”

“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak.”

By the good grace of Lizard Priest’s forefather, the fearsome naga, the claw he had tossed on the ground became a soldier as they watched.

And the all-compassionate Earth Mother granted all of them, including this newly made warrior, the miracle of Protection. She had heard the cry of Priestess as she clung to her staff.

Now safe behind an invisible barrier, High Elf Archer nimbly set an arrow in her bow and took aim at the door. Her long ears fidgeted up and down, betraying her nervousness.

“It’s gone quiet outside.”

“They’ve noticed.” Goblin Slayer, sunk in a deep stance, crept toward the door. “With those holes blocked, the poison gas will have begun flooding back toward them. We may have killed several already…”

It was a good guess. The unsettling rumble of battle drums echoed up from deep within the earth. Then footsteps of a huge crowd of *something* coming toward them. A scraping of metal that must have meant armor.

The goblins were already close.

The door, barricaded by the coffin, began to shake; then there was a dull sound of something being slammed against it. The first thump produced no effect, but then there was a second, and a third. The door began to groan under the impacts.

At last, part of the door gave way with a great cracking noise, and a dirty yellow eye peered in.

“Look out!” Even as she shouted, High Elf Archer let her arrow fly.

“GRRB?!”

The bud-tipped arrow threaded through the rent in the door and pierced the goblin through the eye. The creature fell backward with an ear-rending screech, but his companions quickly filled the void.

“I can’t tell how many footsteps there are, but there’s something weird out there!” yelled High Elf Archer.

The goblins, of course, were not going to stand around to be shot.

As soon as they realized the adventurers in the room were fighting back, arrows began flying through the opening.

“O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak!”

The Earth Mother protected her humble disciple as fiercely as any mother would her child. Protection had saved them from a hail of arrows before; sporadic potshots weren’t going to get through.

As long as the girl clung to her staff and prayed, the arrows would never reach them.

“They’re coming… They’re coming… A swarm of ’em!” Dwarf Shaman muttered with a frown. His hands moved with blinding speed, supplying his sling with rocks as quickly as he could fling them.

Arrows and stones, wails and bellows, all mixed in the air. But the back and forth through the door didn’t last long. The ebony door may have been ancient beyond memory, but even it could not stand forever against crude weapons and brute strength. Despite the bracing of the stone coffin, it finally gave a great death rattle.

“GORORB!!”

“GROOROB!!”

Goblins flooded into the room amid a shower of wood splinters. Although the implements were rough-hewn, they carried swords, spears, and bows. They even wore leather armor and chain mail.

“They’re well equipped.”

Goblin Slayer noticed one exceptionally large creature who seemed to be leading them.

“A hob… No.”

With a soft grunt and a flash of his right arm, he flung his dagger at the creature.

It struck true, piercing the vital point of an exposed shoulder, but the wound was clearly not fatal.

Goblins are often referred to as “little devils,” but there was nothing little about this one. His dark green skin rippled with muscles, so many he seemed fit to burst with them. He held a club.

The ugly smile on his face was certainly that of a goblin, but…

"GORAORARO!!"

"So. A goblin champion."

The champion had stumbled slightly when the dagger struck him, but now he pulled the blade out and gave a gaping grin.

Without a moment's hesitation, Goblin Slayer drew his unusual sword.

"I'm going in."

"Indeed! Let me add a blade to your number!"

The howling Lizard Priest drew his fang-sword and, following his Dragontooth Warrior, leaped into the fray.

Swords rang out, and shouts, and screams. The small burial chamber was soon drenched in the stink of blood. Goblins pressed into the field of battle in swarms. Cut them down, and more would only come. They had to strike the head.

Sword and shield firmly in hand, Goblin Slayer prepared boldly to move forward.

"U-um!"

A voice came from behind him.

It was Priestess, still clutching her staff to her chest.

She looked up at him, shielded by the slings and arrows of Dwarf Shaman and High Elf Archer.

She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Goblin Slayer didn't look back.

Instead, he waded directly into the fight, and soon she could no longer see him.

He moved constantly so that he could not be taken from behind, aiming his sword at the goblins' throats. He thrust his sword backward and skewered another one. What he could not cut, he struck with his shield and sent tumbling.

He wasn't alone. The Dragontooth Warrior fought beside him. One creature crawled up to it with a dagger, but it gave the monster a kick and sent it flying. Its claws crushed the goblin's jaw.

Goblin Slayer spun and threw his sword at a creature armed with a spear. He picked up a club at his feet.

"ORARAGA?!"

"Five."

If he was forced to cross swords with every monster in the room, he would probably wind up as mincemeat himself. There was no telling how many goblins there were in this horde and to deal with them all squarely would leave him exhausted.

Well, he wouldn't deal squarely with them, then. Goblin Slayer was willing to use any and all tactics.

"Give them everything you've got!" he said.

"Gladly!" bellowed Lizard Priest. "Ahhh! See my deeds, my forebear!"

With his tail, he swept aside an enemy approaching from behind, then grabbed one in front and spun it around before flinging it into a wall.

"GORARA?!"

"GROOROBB?!"

Claws and fangs and tail. Lizard Priest's whole body was a weapon, his fighting as brutal as a whirlwind.

Their foes were legion. All four of his limbs lashed out ceaselessly, seeking something to strike. The Dragontooth Warrior helped to open a gap in the enemy line, and Goblin Slayer leaped through it.

"Geez, there's so many!"

"That's why it's called a horde! Keep shooting!"

High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman launched their projectiles at any opponents the three melee combatants had missed.

"How are you holding up, lass?"

"I'm…managing…"

The miracle Priestess had called down from the Earth Mother was still in effect, and the adventurers were doing rather well for themselves against the goblins who pressed in through the door.

But it couldn't last forever. Goblin Slayer knew that better than anyone.

He moved across the battlefield, crushing a goblin skull with the club in his right hand. He used his shield to deliver a blow to a monster who came charging at him with a longsword, then broke the creature with his club.

Then he threw the club, finishing off a third monster, before picking up the longsword from the one he had just killed.

"Seventeen…"

Finally he stooped, covering himself with his shield, and dashed along the wall behind the protection of the stone coffin. He was heading straight for the goblin champion, who was protected by several of his underlings.

The champion was a minor colossus, wearing armor of a dull leaden color, swinging a club and howling. He had to be at least as strong as three goblins and might even have overpowered two people.

A goblin champion was in many ways similar to a hobgoblin. *Hob* was originally an old word meaning a wanderer, a giant, a chief, or a demon. This creature's vast muscles fully justified all those names, an inheritance from his ancestors. He had trained that body by moving from nest to nest, meeting adventurer after adventurer in battle. It was like an adventurer with abundant natural talent who had gained a great deal of experience points—the goblin equivalent of a Platinum rank.

That, in a word, was a goblin champion.

One such creature had taken on the inexperienced Heavy Warrior and Female Knight together at the farm. Most likely, this creature was quite an experienced warrior.

"In the end, though, goblins are goblins…"

This was not to say Goblin Slayer was underestimating the creature. He never underestimated a goblin.

"……"

"ORGOORORB!!"

The champion shouted something intimidating to its trembling henchmen to encourage them to greater feats of valor.

Goblin Slayer, who had successfully slipped around behind the creature, lightly adjusted his grip on his sword.

An old story held that a certain rhea had once knocked off the head of the goblin king with a single stroke of his club. Goblin Slayer had no idea whether the legend was true, but that wouldn't stop him from trying something similar.

Specifically, killing the creature in one blow.

He intended to stab it in the back, straight through its vulnerable brain.

He readied his blade to strike.

"OROAGA?!"

He felt the yielding answer of flesh, saw the geyser of blood…

"Hrm!"

But Goblin Slayer suddenly grunted.

He had pierced something certainly. But it was a different goblin, one that had been thrown toward him.

"GORAGAGA!!"

The champion had used one of his allies as a shield.

Not that this was surprising. Goblin Slayer found it perfectly normal. There is nothing in this world so selfish as a goblin.

All they wanted was to win. If that meant sacrificing their companions or their horde, even their entire race, so be it. This was one crucial point of difference between the thinking of goblins and of those who had words. This tendency, combined with the altogether unjustified anger they felt when their companions were killed, made them quite unpleasant.

"GORORORORB!"

He had pierced the goblin through the stomach, in between the pieces of the creature's armor, and the beast yammered something as blood erupted from the wound.

"Feh…"

Goblin Slayer immediately pulled his sword out and prepared for the next attack. The champion's dirty yellow eyes saw the adventurer who had meant to ambush him. Perhaps he recognized the man who had thrown the dagger at him earlier, for an ugly smile spread over his face.

"GROOOOORB!!"

His powerful arms brought his club up from below in a scooping motion.

"Hrggh?!"

Metal, flesh, and bone twisted; there was an awful rending sound.

Weightlessness, impact, nothingness. A warmth that rose up from his innards. Pain.

In an instant, Goblin Slayer took in the situation. The shield he had instinctively thrown up to protect himself had been sent flying.

And he himself had slammed against one of the coffins that lined the room. The stone shattered with a great crack, dust flying everywhere. The lantern tumbled from his hip and broke, freeing its flames.

"Goblin Slayer! Sir!" Priestess called out to him from where she watched over the battle in the back row.

"Orcbolg! Are you all right?!"

High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman both looked toward him at Priestess's shout.

But there was no response.

"No! Goblin Slayer…sir…?"

Her legs trembled under her, as if she were on a rocking ship.

He was all right. He had to be. He had even come back from the blow from that ogre. He would say, *We won't do anything foolish or silly*. Just like he always did.

But he only lay there in the cloud of dust, like a discarded doll. With a hacking sound, thick blood came out of the visor of the metal helmet.

There was no mistaking it; it had been a critical hit.

"N…!!"

Her staff rattled weakly as it slipped out of her grasp and fell to the floor. She brought her shivering hands to her face. Her delicate features twisted.

"Arrrrgh! Goblin Slayer, sir! Goblin Slayer!"

"GORB! GRROB!"

"GROROB!"

The girl's weeping echoed throughout the room. The goblins cackled horribly; that was one of their favorite sounds.

The vanguard was wounded. The magic user's spirit was broken. The hated Protection would vanish as well. The party had lost its leader—that was what mattered. The goblins, of course, would not let this moment pass. This was how they had buried many adventurers before.

"What is this thing…?!" Lizard Priest cried, even as he battled with the sort of strength only a lizardman possessed.

Though it had killed quite a number of the goblin horde, the Dragontooth Warrior was suddenly struck down.

Lizard Priest would soon be cornered. The three defenders had become one. Even if he held his ground and used all his strength, he could not hold off an entire goblin army.

"Stay calm! Keep your concentra— Grk?!"

Thus, High Elf Archer became the first catch of the day.

She had been firing her arrows without pause, and no goblin had been able to get near her.

But when her pace slackened for an instant, just the blink of an eye, a goblin took advantage of it to jump toward her.

Elves are inherently elegant, slim creatures. Their agility is immense, but they lack brute strength. She struggled to shake the goblin off her back, but it was a futile gesture in the face of the encroaching horde.

"Lemme go! Get off—huh? Ahh! Ahhhh!"

She was dragged to the ground, and with a scream, she vanished under a black mountain of goblins.

For a second, one thin leg stuck out from under the mound, kicking at the air.

“Long-ears!”

Dwarf Shaman was the first to notice what was happening, and the only one able to respond. He tossed aside his sling and, with a yell, took a hand ax from his belt.

“You little beasts! By the gods, get off her!”

His judgment was beyond question; there hadn’t been time to use a spell. If Dwarf Shaman hadn’t leaped in immediately, High Elf Archer might well have been carried off to who knew what fate.

But without any ranged attacks to support the lone close combat fighter, there was nothing to hold back the goblin onslaught.

This was critical.

Now…

“Oh…ahh…”

Now there was nothing between Priestess and the goblin champion.

“No… Oh… Oh no…”

Her teeth chattering and her entire body quaking with fear, she could barely stand. There was a soft thump as she slid to the ground; then she felt something warm and wet spread across her legs.

“GROB! GROORB! GORRRB!”

The smell of it caused the goblin champion to grin mockingly at her. It would be so much easier if she could just lose consciousness. Ironically, it was all the experience she had gained that refused to let her do that.

The champion’s meaty arms stretched out and grabbed her waist.

“Hrr…?! Ahh…!” She groaned as the creature crushed her internal organs.

She was terrified. What if he simply squeezed until her bones broke?

“Hrr…?! Wh-whaa…? Whaaat…?”

But that wasn’t what happened.

The champion pushed his face close to her. His breath reeked of rotting flesh.

“Erryaaaaaaargh!”

And then he took a great bite out of her shoulder, vestments and chain mail and all. Blood gushed out, running red across her white skin.

“Agggh! Ahhh!!”

She had never known such pain. She was at the limits of her endurance. The color drained from her vision. She couldn’t speak, but only wept like a child. She was in an awful state, her eyes running with tears, her nose with snot, spittle hanging from her lips.

“Stop—! —mmit, let…me…go…! Ahh!”

High Elf Archer added her own shouts from beneath the pile of goblins.

There was the sound of tearing clothing. Beating. Screams. Groans.

“This will not do! Master spell caster, I fear that if we do not gather these three and withdraw, we will all be lost!”

“Whaddaya think I’m—? Hey! Gerroff, ya monsters! Off!”

Lizard Priest and Dwarf Shaman continued to fight valiantly, but they couldn’t go on forever.

“GOROROB!”

“GORRB! GORB! GOB!”

The champion and his goblins pointed at them and chortled loudly enough to rouse the dead. This was the fate of anything brought low by goblins, be it an adventurer or a village.

Its fate, its destiny. Due to chance. A roll of the dice.

Horseshit.

“————”

All of it resonated with something deep inside *him.*

When he put one hand on the ground to push himself up, he discovered a staircase leading even deeper underground.

One could have called it a stroke of good luck that the stone casket had been hollow to conceal a hidden staircase. That it hadn’t contained a body or funerary relics like the others.

If it had, it wouldn’t have been able to soften the shock, and he would have died.

But for the moment, he ignored all of this. What mattered was that he was alive. And if he was alive, then he would fight.

He reached into his item bag and pulled out a cracked potion bottle. He struggled to pull out the stopper with a wrist that bent at a strange angle, then gulped down the contents. The healing effects of the medicine were subtle. It was not like a divine miracle that closed wounds instantaneously.

But if the pain would ease, he could move. And if he could move, he could fight.

There was nothing in his way.

With his right hand he groped around the area, seeking anything that might serve as a weapon. His hand gripped what he found, and then he willed his injured hips to raise him up.

Several goblins that had noticed he was still alive and moving came toward him. Each had a weapon in his hand and a cruel laugh in his throat; no doubt they came with thoughts of finishing him off.

But so what?

“.........!”

He swung the shield in his left hand with all his might and beat the goblins to death.

“GORARO?!”

The polished edge of the round shield was weapon enough.

He cracked their skulls, blood and brains flying everywhere. Forward. Forward. He wouldn’t shout until the last moment. He couldn’t. Just like before. He must not be noticed.

The goblin champion was focused on tormenting his new catch. He seemed oblivious to the fact that the interloper he had thrashed earlier was standing behind him. Priestess had gone limp in the demon’s embrace, only twitching now and again. Her lips, turned even redder by the blood that flowed down from her white neck, moved two or three times.

No voice came out.

Was it, *Save me*?

Or *Oh God*?

Or *Mother*? Or *Father*?

Not *Run away*. That would have given him away.

Him… Him…

Goblin Slayer…

“Y-yaaaah!”

Goblin Slayer leaped on the champion from behind.

At first, the champion surely had no idea what was happening.

Something wrapped around his neck—the spinal column and skin of the woman, which had tumbled to the ground during the fighting.

The creature reached up in annoyance to brush away what had been, for him, only bait…

"…!"

But in the next instant, the thing was pulled tight against his throat.

"GO-ORRRRBBBB?!?!?!?!"

He could not quite get the scream out of his throat.

The champion scrabbled at the bones, unable to breathe. A few hairs broke, but it didn't change anything. He could no longer see the priestess he had been about to have his way with. She had rolled onto the ground like an abandoned toy.

"Ahh…"

The thinnest voice. She was still alive.

And that was all Goblin Slayer needed to know.

"Haa—haaaaa!"

He had the bones in his right hand and the woman's hair wrapped around his left. He pulled as hard as he could; the hair bit through his leather gloves and into his flesh.

But the same thing was happening to the goblin champion.

Assassins were said to make wire out of human hair and use it to kill; this was the same principle. It was not easy to untangle oneself from.

The champion twisted his own body, struggling. He rammed backward against a wall.

"Hrk…!"

Blood flowed from Goblin Slayer's helmet again. He gave a cry as his insides were crushed. Even so, his grip did not loosen.

"GOROROB?! GROORB?!"

The champion had grown terrified.

Naturally, the other goblins were not simply standing by and watching their leader get throttled. Several of them had raised their weapons and begun to advance to kill this resurrected enemy.

Until suddenly, their heads went flying off, replaced by spouts of blood.

They had been killed by the champion's club as he swung it about in his desperate struggle. The headless goblin corpses slumped to the ground.

This was too much, even for them.

Goblins showed no fear of death when they believed they could win. If loot and debauchery awaited them on the other side of victory, so much the better.

But here—*could* they win?

“Yaaaaaaahhhhh!”

A great roar.

A moment’s indecision, an instant’s hesitation, spelled the goblins’ defeat.

With a bellow to honor his ancestors, Lizard Priest, now free once more, set upon the monsters. His fang-sword, drenched in goblin blood, whirled like a storm in his scaly hands.

“GRRB?!”

“GORORB?!”

With each flash of the blade, a hand or a foot or a head went flying. With his tail, he knocked down those who tried to flee, and with his fang, he finished them.

Thrown into confusion, the goblins rushed to surround Lizard Priest—only to meet a rain of wooden arrows.

“Go!”

A familiar voice rang out.

She was covering her exposed chest and drenched in goblin blood, but she was there. As she shot her bow while kneeling, High Elf Archer shouted, “I’ll handle these guys!”

“My thanks!” Lizard Priest shouted and began to weave his way through the attackers.

He was trying to get to where Priestess lay on the ground. He still had some spells left.

That meant the girl was going to be okay, High Elf Archer thought with a relieved sigh.

“…Thanks.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

It was Dwarf Shaman beside her who answered her murmur.

Covered in blood splatters, breathing heavily, and still holding his ax, he handily dispatched any goblins who came hoping to kill the enemy archer.

“I can’t believe I owe my life to a dwarf. I’ll never live it down.” She turned away, struggling to hide her small chest. Her ears twitched. “For an elf, the only thing more shameful than that would be not to say thank you.”

“Leave it to an elf to go from weeping for help to being up on her high horse,” Dwarf Shaman said with a barely suppressed chuckle.

She winked at him. “Better than your *low* horse, right?”

As she tried to affect nonchalance, she loosed an arrow at the goblin champion and let out a shout.

“Get him, Orcbolg!”

“Hrrr!”

Goblin Slayer held the bundle of hair like the reins of a horse. He clung to the back of the champion, who flung him left and right like a bucking stallion. At first, each jolt had hurt him so badly he thought his body might fly apart. But now he felt no pain, nothing. All that was left was a strange lightness, like floating in the water.

Some objective part of his mind was sounding a warning. Pain was proof you were alive. And now he felt no pain. Perhaps his nerves had been overwhelmed.

Had he made the wrong choice?

He almost fancied he heard a whisper:

Go forward unto death. Pound the nail into your own coffin.

But the lack of pain also happened to be convenient for him.

Whatever foolish or silly thing it takes to win—I will do it.

“Hey…!”

His voice squeezed out from between his lips.

Could the words that echoed in his mind have reached the mind of the goblin champion?

The creature struggled to turn his head and see the enemy that clung to his back. A grimy, blood-caked metal helm reflected in his filthy yellow eyes.

“Take a good look, goblin.”

Goblin Slayer raised his broken right arm and jammed it into the eye. He grasped something disturbingly soft, scratched and clawed at it.

“GRORARARAB?! GROOROROROB?!?!”

The champion howled incoherently in agony, bending backward.

Goblin Slayer went with him, rolling to the stone floor. He barely avoided being crushed by the giant body as it collapsed to the ground with a resounding thump.

Breathing raggedly, Goblin Slayer used nearby bones to push himself up. The warrior was covered in blood and wounds, near death, but the goblins simply watched him from afar.

There was no good reason for them to do so. It would have been easy to finish him off at that moment.

And yet they were unmistakably *afraid* of him.

"Who's next…?" The voice was dispassionate, toneless, and cold as the wind blowing through a valley. "Is it you…?"

Goblin Slayer flung the lump of flesh in his right hand. The champion's eyeball hit the ground and burst with a wet noise.

"GORB…! GARARARAB!!"

The champion staggered to his feet and began to babble. Blood and pus streamed like a waterfall down his face from his missing left eye.

"GOB…"

The goblins stood frozen. One of them dropped his spear. His eyes flitted back and forth between the goblin champion and Goblin Slayer, both of them wreathed in blood.

That did it.

"GORROROROB!!"

The goblin champion gave a roar that could only be an order to retreat.

"GORARAB! GORAB!"

"GROOB! GROB!"

Screaming, the goblins forgot everything else and fled.

In this, as in all things, the goblin champion led them. A champion he was, but still a goblin.

Each goblin was most interested in his own survival; all they wanted was to escape this place. Thus, the idea of holding their ground against impossible odds never so much as occurred to them, and the rout gained momentum quickly. First two, then four, then eight fled…

One after another, goblins dove for the exit, weeping and shouting. At last, only the piles of goblin corpses and the gasping adventurers were left.

No one suggested they should pursue the enemy. All of them were wounded and exhausted; they could barely think of moving.

"……"

Only Goblin Slayer was different.

He dug unsteadily through the bones and used the hand spear he found as an improvised walking stick to hobble around the room. Dragging his feet pitifully as he moved, he began to check each of the bodies.

As he went, he dripped a trail of blood, as if he were a brush running along a canvas.

“………hrr…”

One step. Two. A violent shake, then Goblin Slayer’s body lurched at a strange angle.

“Orcbolg…!”

High Elf Archer worked her way over to him and supported him from the side. She didn’t begrudge him the blood that ran onto her torn clothes and exposed skin.

In a terribly thin voice, Goblin Slayer asked, “Are you… okay…?”

“Somehow… But…” High Elf Archer’s voice was strained, too. “I’m not so sure about you…”

To her, he felt like a bag full of spare parts.

Even so, he managed to mutter, “Perhaps,” and nod. “What about the girl…?”

“…This way. Can you walk?”

“I’ll try.”

High Elf Archer struggled to support Goblin Slayer, who seemed like he might collapse at any moment. She felt a warmth on her cheeks and suddenly realized tears were beading up in her eyes.

She bit her lip.

“Try to have some…dignity, you two.”

As they veritably crawled along, they found Dwarf Shaman’s arms supporting them.

He was in no better shape than they were. Blood soaked him from the top of his head to the tip of his beloved beard, and his bag of catalysts, as well as his belt, had been badly torn.

Even so, the dwarf managed to hold Goblin Slayer up with his great hands.

“After all, we still…have to get home…”

“…Right.”

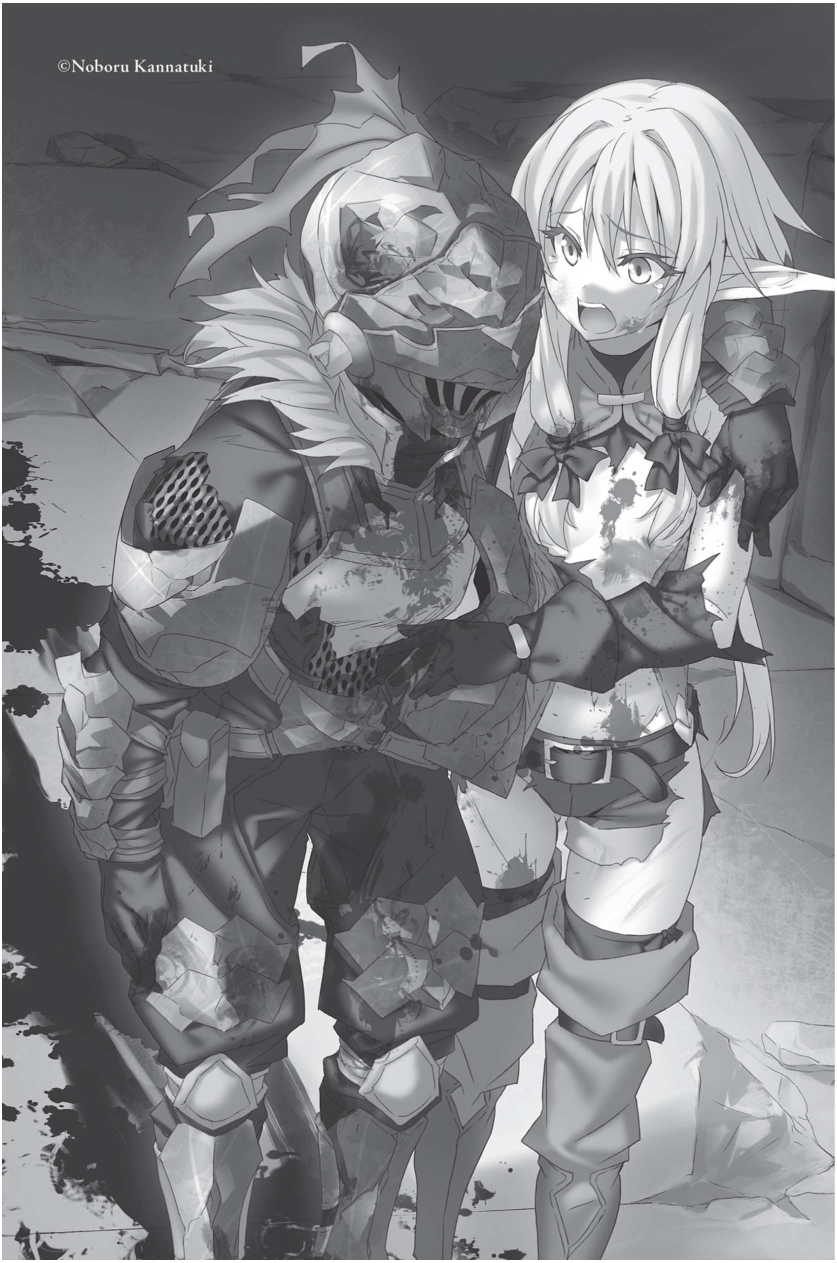
Then, together, they walked the vast-seeming but terribly short distance. Soon they were in the center of the room, beside the shattered coffin. A broken fang-sword rested there, Lizard Priest sitting beside it.

“Well, now. It was a close call, but I think she will come through.”

Priestess lay at his feet, swaddled in his tail.

The flames of the broken lantern were the only illumination, the light playing across her form.

Her bloodstained vestments and chain mail had been pulled away; bandages were wrapped around her pale shoulders and chest. Her hair was stuck to her sweating cheeks, and her eyes were still closed. The barely perceptible rise and fall of her chest was the only sign that she was alive.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"How is she?"

Lizard Priest narrowed his eyes and gently raised Priestess's head with his tail.

"Mm. Her life is not in danger. Though if the wound had been any deeper, it would have been beyond my abilities."

"I see."

"Here, hang on. I'll help you sit. That'll be easiest, right?" High Elf Archer said, almost whispering, as Goblin Slayer struggled for breath. "Dwarf, you take that side."

"'Course."

Together, they lowered him down by the stone coffin, at Priestess's side.

It felt like he might topple over the moment they took their hands away. Even the way he sat looked more like he had fallen on his behind.

"I…I'm…s-s…orr…"

"Don't worry about it."

Goblin Slayer held out his hand, gloved in leather that was tattered, dirty, in altogether terrible shape. He rested it on the ground next to her. Priestess took it weakly with her own small hand.

"Gob…S…ayer…sir…"

At long last, he murmured:

"These things happen."

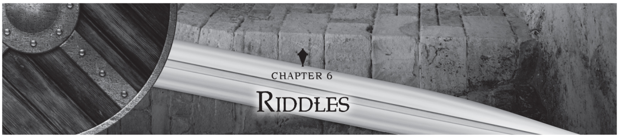
"Let's head back up," High Elf Archer said. "We don't want to be here when they come back. Orcbolg, can you stand?"

"Ahh, go find yourself a coat or somethin', lass. I can help Beard-cutter."

"It seems I will have to bear him on my shoulders," said Lizard Priest. "Gather yourselves. We shall be safe soon…"

Someone was saying something.

But Goblin Slayer felt consciousness slipping away, and then everything was dark.



CHAPTER 6

RIDDLES

“Just how long do you plan to sleep, dunderhead?”

The voice that thundered through his brain conspired with the piercing pain to wake him.

He leaped up, took a stance, looked around. Freezing cold bit into his skin.

White.

Everything was white.

It was the white darkness, the same as always. He was more familiar with this world than with the light of the sun.

He was in a cave—probably deep in it—surrounded by water and ice.

No sooner had he gathered where he was than another resounding smack landed on the side of his head. The blow was hot and painful, as if he’d been hit with tongs, and its contrast with the cold confused him completely.

“What are you starin’ for? If you’re up, then greet me!”

The nasal, haranguing voice echoed through the cave, but he could not see its source.

He didn’t dare try to discover where the voice was coming from. If he peered around the cave, he would only invite another blow.

And it wasn’t possible to see through Burglar’s invisibility in the first place.

In these months—or years?—of training, he had come to understand that very well. In this dimness, his sense of time was fuzzy at best. It was like the flakes of snow that blew by and refused to be caught.

The old man was known by many names, including the Traveler, but he preferred to be called Burglar or Master.

“Of course, master. Thank you for being here.”

He bowed his head, though he didn’t know where he should bow it to.

He heard a quiet snort and felt a momentary thrill of nervousness. If he had angered the master, he wouldn't get off with a simple rebuke. The master might even stop training him.

And that was a matter of life and death.

"Hrm. Good enough."

His master seemed satisfied for now.

He remained prostrate, careful not to breathe a sigh of relief. He allowed some snow to settle in his mouth, then closed his lips. The breath he had let out so carelessly was warm, and the mist it created in the air would give him away. It wouldn't be the first time he had been scolded for this lapse.

"Master, what should I do today?"

"What should you do?" Burglar gave a mocking little huff. "That's the stupidest question I've ever heard! What kind of idiot are you?"

Suddenly, something flew at him from the darkness.

He was caught completely unawares, and the snowball hit him full in the face. The wet sensation quickly turned into a chattering discomfort.

Burglar had deliberately packed the projectile lightly, so that it would spread cold snow all over him. How viciously clever.

"I got you! So now go get them! The goblins!"

"Yes, sir."

He stared straight ahead, not even bothering to wipe the ice off his face. The thought that it might give him frostbite didn't even cross his mind. The pain, the bitterness, the goblins. They were all just part of his daily life. Barely even worth mentioning.

But he heard Burglar murmur, "How about it? They're smart, they're cruel, and they are many. They are vile. Can you kill the goblins?"

"I will kill them."

"Even though when they were making sport of your sister, you only watched?"

Burglar gave a weird, grating laugh.

He felt the fire vanish from his belly, along with the heated emotion that weighed in his mind like a stone.

"I know what you're going to say. You didn't have the strength then, did you?"

He bit his lip.

"Yes, sir."

"Wrong! That is wrong!"

This time, the wet sensation was mixed with a dull pain. Burglar was clever and cruel. He had added pebbles to the loosely packed snow.

His forehead hurt; he felt like it was swelling with every beat of his heart. He felt blood dribbling from the wound, melting the snow stuck to his face as it went.

It wasn't serious.

The skull was one of the hardest bones in the body, not so easily broken. Another lesson he had learned well. He made no move to wipe away the blood, only looked in the direction where he thought Burglar was.

"It's because you *chose* to do nothing!"

It seared him.

His fist already felt more like a rock than a hand, but he clenched it still tighter.

"What's that? *Why* didn't you fight those goblins? *Why* didn't you escape with your sister?"

The air moved slightly. Burglar had probably come close enough to stare him in the face, just to make the point. He could smell the stink of wine on Burglar's breath, but he still couldn't see him, not even his shadow.

"It's because *you refused to save her*. Questions of success or failure, life or death, those come later!"

"I have nooo power! I can't do aaaanything!

"Oh! The gods granted me strength! Now I can kill allll the goblins!

"Oh! A legendary hero mentored me! Now I can kill allll the goblins!

"Oh! Look at this holy sword I found! Look out, goblins!

"Now I have the power to do aaaanything!"

Burglar's sneering singsong echoed around the icy chamber.

"You think a boy who did nothing when he had no power will do anything once he gains it?"

"..."

"Even if he did, it would just be a show! And every show ends sooner or later."

Foosh. The air rippled again. He didn't move his eyes, but tried to follow the feel of it.

"Listen up," Burglar said. "You have no genius. You have no talent. You're one more nameless vagabond with nothing to distinguish you."

Thump. Something bit gently into his chest.

He looked up in a rush to see an eye staring back at him. The small, glittering orb was a strange yellow color, like a burning torch.

"But you're the one who gets to choose."

He swallowed heavily.

"When you've decided to act, that is your victory. Not that you won't be a laughingstock if you try and fail."

Burglar's voice suddenly grew quiet. He snapped his fingers, and a bonfire he must have prepared at some point flared to life.

The white walls of the cave took on the color of the flames.

This was indeed a snowy fissure, surrounding him with ice, snow, and chill air.

But the instant that thought distracted him, Burglar vanished, leaving not so much as a shadow.

"You need luck, wits—and *guts*!" Burglar bellowed in a voice that echoed unsettlingly.

He tried to steady his breathing and stood slowly.

He took his stance: arms up, feet slightly apart, hips lowered.

"First, decide if you're going to do it—then do it!"

"Yes, sir."

When he nodded, a few drops of blood went flying, stippling red across his feet. He paid it no mind. *Focus on not slipping on the snow.*

"If you get that right, you can turn giants to stone, crush spiders bigger than you are, kill dragons, even defeat the king of hell!"

"Yes, master."

"You have bad luck, and you're not very smart. But do you have willpower? I'm going to train them all at once—look up!"

He obediently looked up. A dazzling, dangerously bright light met his eyes.

It was the field of icicles that grew from the ceiling of the snow cave. With their piercing points aimed straight down at him, they appeared like an army of knights.

The heat of the fire had begun to have its effect: A single droplet spattered down on him.

“Time for a guessing game. I have a riddle for you! If you want to live, you’d best answer quickly!”

“Yes, master.”

“Good, good!”

He heard a smacking sound of Burglar licking his lips. Riddles were a form of battle as old as the gods—sacred, inviolable, absolute. It was said they went back to even before the gods began rolling dice.

Of course, none of that mattered to him. He would answer. That was all.

“I crisscross the sky.
“Cruel beak tears flesh.
“Your nightmare! Your sworn enemy!
“But kill me, and it is your blood that will flow.
“What am I?”

The very first thing he thought of was a goblin.

But goblins didn’t fly, and they didn’t have beaks.

Just as he was about to cross his arms to think, another snowball came flying at him.

He slid sideways across the ice to avoid it. A few drops of blood flew from his face and landed on the ice, mingling with the melted water and turning it pink.

The answer came to him in a flash.

“A mosquito.”

“Correct!” Burglar gave a snort that suggested he was not amused. “But that was just a warm-up. Next!”

“The seas stand dry.
“The rivers do not run.
“The trees stand bare.
“The towns have no buildings.
“The castles no men!
“Where are we?”

He didn’t have the slightest idea.

The names of ravaged kingdoms both historical and mythical floated into his mind, then drifted away. All were places he'd heard of in the stories his sister told him. Had none of them met a fate as terrible as the riddle described?

"Baaah, what's wrong?" Burglar demanded. "Don't just daydream! Move! Or it'll be the end of you!"

Before he could even think about it, he reflexively rolled to the side.

An icicle struck the floor and shattered.

He didn't have his helmet on. He had to focus on protecting his head.

Then, suddenly, he was reminded of the answer in a riddle game he and his sister had played long ago. Although at the time, he hadn't been able to outsmart her.

"We must be on a map."

"Ha-ha! Exactly! But what took you so long?"

He heard mocking applause. It echoed off the walls until he couldn't figure out where it was coming from.

He blocked out the noise in his ears, instead looking near and far, side to side, then up to the ceiling. He couldn't let down his guard. His thinking had to be clear. *Control your breath.*

The room was so cold, yet at some point he had started to sweat. He tried to wipe away the blood and sweat with one arm to keep it from getting into his eyes, but doing so brought an unpleasant sting to his injuries.

"Come on now, keep going!"

"More just than the gods.
"More evil than the Dark Gods.
"The rich need me.
"But for me the poor find no use.
"What am I?"

For him, this was an especially hard one. And Burglar was not about to let him stand and think calmly. The snowballs came flying from every direction; he rolled across the ice to avoid them.

He was losing feeling in his limbs; they had passed blue and were turning purple.

But there was no time to worry about it. A creak sounded from above him.

"Careful now! Here comes another one!"

Another icicle melted away from the ceiling and drove down at him.

"…!"

Burglar would not even let him dodge safely. Yet another snowball came and struck him in the shoulder; snow sprayed everywhere and pebbles bit into his flesh. He struggled to suppress a groan of pain.

There was no time. He couldn't think. He had no answer. He had nothing. That made him angry—and then it came to him.

He looked up and shouted:

"*Nothing!*" He stomped the earth with both feet, regaining his stance, and added, "The answer is nothing!"

"Yes! But there is something more evil than the Dark Gods and possessed of more cruel wit!"

Burglar had no intention of letting him rest, but flung riddles at him as quickly as he could answer.

In the white darkness, blood flowing from his shoulder and his forehead, he stood and faced the questions.

"Black
"Within black
"Within black
"Within black."

He shouted back immediately:

"A goblin—in the womb of the captured woman in a goblin cage in a goblin cave!"

He never forgot about the goblins, not even for a second. The answer required no thought at all. He smirked at his invisible teacher and said, "Simple."

"Oh, is it? Then, try this!"

"At any time, at any moment,
"You might encounter him,
"Him there is no escaping!
"You cannot speak to him!
"There, he is beside you!
"Too bad for you! Game over!"

The last riddle must have been just a way of buying enough time to come up with this one. Burglar was full of cheap tricks. They taught him a great deal.

But the answer to this riddle completely escaped him.

Breathing raggedly, he slipped past snowballs and dodged icicles. The snow tore at his skin and the ice pounded it, until his entire body was raw and bleeding. The blood and sweat dripped from his brow into his eyes, obscuring his vision, while the wound on his shoulder throbbed.

Through it all, he thought furiously. The gears in his mind turned; he blinked several times, marshaling all his intelligence, searching for an answer.

It didn't take long to discover what was right near him.

He licked his lips lightly and spoke the answer as clearly as he could.

"He is death."

"Ha-haaa! A fine answer!"

Burglar's peals of laughter bounced throughout the cavern. A spray of water droplets came down, shaken free by the echo.

"You have no luck. You have no wits. The only thing you have is guts. So think! Think with all the guts you have!"

"Yes, master."

He nodded obediently. He had no idea why Burglar looked after him, but he was alone, his village gone, and he had only one goal left to him. The old man was giving him the teachings and the strategies he would need to reach it. He would never consider questioning the words of his master.

"And be forthright—yes, you've become good at that. Good for a boy like you, anyway. Last one!"

Burglar appeared before him as if out of thin air. He was a small man, less than half his height, and dark as a shadow.

The old rhea man held a shimmering short sword and wore platinum mail. He gazed at him with two shining eyes and smiled, revealing his uneven teeth.

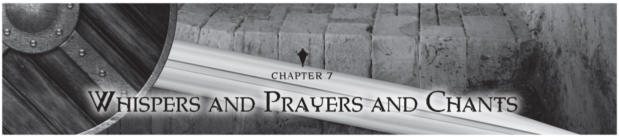
"What have I got in my pocket?"

It was a cruel trick, technically against the rules of the riddle game.

He struggled to answer but could think of nothing.

He opened his mouth to beg for at least three guesses, but in the next instant, a dull pain ran through his head once more, and he felt his consciousness melting away.

To this day, he didn’t know the answer to that riddle.



CHAPTER 7

Whispers and Prayers and Chants

When he awoke, he was once more confronted with a world of white.

He was lying on a soft bed with clean sheets. The room was pleasantly warm, and the ceiling far away. Between the white stone pillars that lined the room was a bracing blue sky. Sunlight filtered through the branches of the trees in the garden and settled on his eyes.

"…Hmm."

Goblin Slayer sat up slowly. His head felt light, his vision wide. He turned his head two times, three. He wasn't wearing his helmet. It must have been removed at some point. His other equipment and his clothes were gone.

Where was he? It must have been a room in the water town Temple.

At least it wasn't that nest of filthy goblins underground. That meant he could probably assume the others had escaped safely as well.

"…"

Having confirmed this to himself, he gave a little nod. It was entirely unlike him to lose consciousness from his wounds.

But he was alive, and that meant there would be a next time. If he won in the end, that would be enough. There would be no problem.

Still…such a familiar dream…

His master had taken him on at ten years old, and they had parted ways when he was fifteen. All that had happened more than five years ago. He couldn't imagine the cunning old rhea had died. What was he up to now?

One morning the master had simply said, "I'm going on a journey," and blinked out of sight, and that had been the end of it.

"…Now."

Having taken stock of his surroundings, he gingerly stretched out his right arm.

The bones he'd thought were shattered had knitted together again; it seemed as good as new. Starting with his thumb, he curled his fingers inward one by one, checking the joints. He made a fist, then opened it.

He repeated the process with his left arm. Nothing hurt; nothing failed to work as expected. Even for a healing miracle, this was impressive.

"……Hmm."

Ribs next, then. But when he reached down to check them, he felt something strange at his waist.

He looked down to see a young woman, wearing nothing but her skin.

"Er…hmm."

Priestess's face was innocent in sleep. Those elegant arms, so slim they looked like they might break at any moment, were wrapped around his waist, clinging to him.

"……"

Goblin Slayer let out a breath.

She was slender, as delicate as if she were made of glass. Yet he could, he supposed, imagine how she had become an adventurer.

With great care, he rolled back the sheets, just far enough to check her neck and shoulder. The skin there seemed even whiter than usual for her, but there was no sign of a wound.

"Nn…oh."

She shifted slightly. Her face was peaceful.

Goblin Slayer rolled the sheets up again.

"………"

He must have been a pretty poor student. It had been five years since he and his master had gone their separate ways, and he still hadn't managed to kill all the goblins.

And now look at him.

His personal failure no longer affected only him. There were five people in his party, including himself. A low moan escaped him.

"He never taught me about this…"

"Oh-ho, you're awake." The rich voice came unexpectedly.

How long had she been there—the pale woman standing beside the bed? She was clad only in some cloth through which she was clearly visible; seeing her beauty, one could have mistaken her for a living statue of a goddess.

"And? How was it?" Sword Maiden whispered with those full lips, putting one hand on the bed and leaning toward him. She wore a garment cut from a single cloth; in her hand was the sword-and-scales staff. She was the saint who ruled over law. "Sharing a pillow with me…and her?"

"It wasn't bad." He nodded at her. She put her hand on his cheek. Her fingers were cold.

Goblin Slayer's voice was as dispassionate as ever.

"So this is the miracle Resurrection…achieved by sharing a bed with a virgin."

"My, you've heard of it?"

"Secondhand."

Sword Maiden gave a pouty look and drew back as if disappointed.

Resurrection: a healing miracle that surpassed Minor Heal and Refresh. It could give warmth to a champion of old, tormented by the cold, or it could cool the temper of a raging hero. When the barbarian king had been gravely wounded, it protected him from the spirits of death.

And it came of sharing a bed with one of the immaculate maidens who served the gods. Or so said many tales of old.

But they were not just tales. They were true. If a maiden who served the gods would pray with her whole being, then the gods would hear her supplication.

Naturally, of course, this did not mean that one could be brought back from the dead. It was simply not within human power to contravene the laws of nature. If one were not among the brave few chosen by the gods, one would simply turn to dust or one's soul would vanish. Even the necromancers with all their knowledge could not truly bring someone back from the dead.

Resurrection, rather, was a miracle for those who were on the border between life and death, pulling them back to this side of the veil.

Few adventurers ever had the chance to benefit from it, though, for three simple, obvious reasons.

First, as the miracle had to be performed within the confines of a temple, it was all but impossible to use while on an adventure. Second, adventurers' reputation for rowdiness led many who could perform the miracle to avoid them, lest they be taken for harlots. And finally, hefty compensation was typically expected for this miracle.

It was true divine intervention, a miracle not possible for a priestess of Obsidian rank to perform alone. In light of all this, few besides Sword Maiden had likely ever offered this supplication to the gods.

Perhaps she noticed Goblin Slayer's look, for a soft laugh escaped her.

"I understand that taking my compensation out of your wages would be typical for an adventurer."

"I was under the impression that this was not a typical adventure."

"You never do cease to surprise me. Aren't you Silver? The third rank?"

"…Mm."

For the moment, Goblin Slayer had nothing to say in response. He had been told to "act his rank" more times than he cared to remember.

Sword Maiden nodded in satisfaction at the sight of him dumbstruck, then let out a little giggle.

"I don't suppose I could be considered immaculate anymore…"

The archbishop with her smiling eyes sounded almost like she was talking about someone else.

The usual strip of black cloth covering her eyes was gone, and Goblin Slayer could see them for the first time. They seemed somehow distant, as though they weren't quite focused. It was the one imperfection in this otherwise flawless creature who served her god so devoutly.

Her beauty had been disfigured in an especially cruel way.

"Goblins?"

"Yes." Sword Maiden nodded, without seeming terribly bothered by the answer. "It should be ten years ago now. I was an adventurer, then, too…"

Finally her eyes moved, casting a sidelong glance at Goblin Slayer.

"You want to hear what they did to me, in their cave, when they caught me?"

"I already know," Goblin Slayer said shortly.

She let a chuckle slip out in response. "I cried out that it hurt. I wept like a little girl."

She put one thin, pale arm with its scars on her generous hip, ran her slim fingers along it as if to make a point.

"But," she said. Her full lips gave way to the whisper of an innocent girl. "I *can* see. Only dimly, but I can see you there, like a shadow."

Her hand came off her hip and moved slowly, searchingly. The porcelain-like fingers traced his outline in the air.

"I see them everywhere. But I always feel that if I look away for even a moment, they'll just disappear…"

"…"

"…like people are no more than shadows."

Goblin Slayer remained silent.

He looked around for his gear. He saw his helmet and armor, along with his sword, shield, and item bag, all piled at the end of the bed. They were grimy with blood and dirt, as they always were, but he noticed his armor was badly damaged. He had patched it up just before coming on this adventure, but now it looked like he would need to replace it entirely.

"I want to repair my equipment. Is there a workshop or an equipment shop nearby?"

Sword Maiden didn't answer. With her blind eyes, she stared at a person who seemed to her a shadow.

"People…women…are so weak."

The soft bed gave a faint creak. Sword Maiden slid down to lie at Goblin Slayer's side. Her ample chest shook.

"When I think of that, and then I think of the vastness of the evil in this world, I start to fear we shall be overpowered…" He felt her soft, full flesh. Her warmth. "…I am anxious. I am afraid. It must seem strange."

Was that roses he smelled? Faintly sweet, fragrant.

"Sword Maiden I may be, but every, every night I am fearful. I am terrified. I cannot stand it!"

With that, she clawed at her shoulders, her chest. The cloth tore, exposing her scarred body. It would hardly have been surprising if a man in such a position had lost all reason.

This was Sword Maiden.

The woman who had done battle with the Demon Gods and saved the world ten years ago.

To think she was as beautiful as this even after the goblins had burned her eyes—if she had looked at any man with tears in her eyes, who could have resisted her?

"This is the world we live in. No matter how much help you have…"

"…"

"I don't suppose I can expect anyone else to understand, can I?"

"Is that so?"

Such was Goblin Slayer's brief reply, as dispassionate as ever.

"'Is that so?' he says. Hee-hee."

The archbishop gave a disappointed, slightly incredulous laugh.

"Is something…strange?"

"Don't you think so? I am the woman who defeated the Demon Gods. And here I am, afraid of some goblins." With that, she drew back, righting her vestment.

She took her staff in hand and covered her eyes with a black cloth. When she stood once more, sure and steady, all hint of the seductress from before had gone.

"You." Her hidden eyes turned beseechingly toward Goblin Slayer. "Will you help me?"

He didn't say anything. Or rather, he couldn't say anything.

For when he opened his mouth to answer, she disappeared into the shadow of a pillar. He heard her shuffling footsteps grow more and more distant. A moment later came the sound of a heavy door opening and closing.

Goblin Slayer heaved a sigh.

He delicately extricated himself from Priestess's slim arms and got out of the bed. As he stretched to relax his stiff muscles, her eyes fluttered open.

"Hrrm… Oh… Huh?"

She sat up languidly, rubbing her eyes. She glanced around vacantly, but when her eyes came into focus, her face instantly turned bright red.

"Oh! Uh! Oh… Uhh…" In a flurry, she pulled up the sheets to hide her bare chest.

Goblin Slayer took his own clothes in hand, not sparing her so much as a glance.

"Did you see anything?"

"Yes."

Priestess's face crumpled pitifully.

Confronted with a girl who seemed about to burst into tears, Goblin Slayer thought for a moment before opening his mouth.

“Calm down.”

Her shoulders gave a little jerk.

“Your wounds are gone.”

Now Priestess looked down, confused.

Unsure of what to say, Goblin Slayer silently got dressed.

First his underwear, then his under armor, then his chain mail. Thankfully, it hadn’t been damaged.

The leather armor, however, was beyond help. Not that he was that attached to it. But it would take time to break in a new set, and that was a problem.

“Are…are your injuries better, too…?”

Priestess seemed to have finally collected herself. She rose from the bed, too, still clutching the sheets against her front.

“Yes.” He nodded.

Standing back-to-back with Goblin Slayer, Priestess began to dress. Simple undergarments covered her bottom and small chest, and a singlet went over them. She took a regretful look at her chain mail, which was missing a large chunk at the shoulder, then put on her vestments. They were simple, reflecting the devotion to poverty that adherents of the Earth Mother all voluntarily bore, but every tear in them had been neatly repaired.

She also wore no makeup of any kind. Compared to Goblin Slayer with his heavy equipment, it took her only moments to get dressed.

“Goblin Slayer, sir…”

“What?”

He turned at the hesitant voice. While her clothes had been rustling, he had put on leggings and greaves. Goblins were short, and protection for the legs couldn’t be overlooked.

“You didn’t do something…rash…or…or anything, did you?”

“What makes you think I did?”

“You seem…different somehow.”

At that, his hand stopped moving, just for a second.

“……No,” he said decisively, after a moment’s silence.

He took up his helmet, which had a few new dents in it, and slid it firmly over his head. He breathed in and let it out.

“Nothing’s different at all.”

He could feel Priestess’s eyes boring into his back, as if about to say something, but Goblin Slayer stood.

He had to get new weapons, new equipment, provisions, medicine, and much else. The most important thing in goblin slaying was preparation.

"Um, Goblin Slayer, sir…?"

"What?"

It was just as he turned slowly toward the thin voice.

"*There* you are!"

The heavy door was kicked open with a slam that spoke to the powerful emotions of the person entering the room.

"I heard you two were up! How are you? Are you all right?"

The owner of the refreshing, cool voice came bounding in. It was, of course, High Elf Archer.

With her hair flying behind her and her long ears bouncing, she was the very picture of joy. Smiling like a child, she was followed by Dwarf Shaman and Lizard Priest, neither of whom showed quite her enthusiasm.

"Looks like you're none the worse for wear, Beard-cutter and young lady."

"Ahh, that is the important thing. It seems the spell was performed in time."

Everyone smiled, their voices cheerful.

With a low grunt, Goblin Slayer looked each of them in the face and nodded. "All of you are all right?"

"You're asking us, Orcbolg?"

"What about the canary?"

"Fine, too! Orcbolg, I think you were in more danger than any of us." High Elf Archer pursed her lips and jumped lightly onto the bed, sinking into it. "What a bed! You know she was like, 'Goblin Slayer, sir?!' the minute she came to? All weepy and everything!"

"Wh-wh-wha—?! You promised you wouldn't—!"

Priestess turned red afresh at High Elf Archer's teasing, shaking her arms vigorously in protest.

High Elf Archer barely noticed. "If I didn't tell him, how would he know?"

Lizard Priest happily lapped at the tip of his nose with his tongue.

"Well, be that as it may, now there is nothing to keep us from resuming our exploration."

There were, among other matters, the goblins who had escaped them the last time. Goblin Slayer nodded, and his battered helmet creaked slightly.

“Hmm,” Lizard Priest breathed and rolled his eyes. “Or perhaps we ought first to attend to our equipment…”

“What’s wrong with you, Scaly? *First*, we have a meal! My stomach is eating itself!”

“Ah, what *was* I thinking?” Lizard Priest slapped his forehead in mock dismay at Dwarf Shaman’s teasing.

Priestess giggled at the comical gesture, causing High Elf Archer to narrow her eyes like a cat.

“You might be hungry, dwarf, but if you don’t lose a little weight, I think your belt is going to burst!”

“Say what you will, my anvil-chested friend, but I’m known as quite the bon vivant!”

“What did you call me?” High Elf Archer’s ears flattened, and the two proceeded in one of their boisterous arguments.

Goblin Slayer watched the familiar scene intently. He looked like a traveler who had seen a ghost and was trying to tell whether what he saw now was real.

“…Has no one eaten yet?”

It had taken him a moment to come up with the question, and it wasn’t directed at anyone in particular.

“Not yet,” Priestess answered. “Partly because I did have to help with the Resurrection.”

“Why?”

“We had a promise, didn’t we?”

He didn’t seem to grasp her meaning.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, she continued, “When we got through this, we would all have a meal together.”

“Hrm…”

“And you have to keep your promises, right?”

Then she smiled, like a blooming flower in the sun.

INTERLUDE

Of an Adventurer Quite Meddling with Other Adventurers

Ahh, dammit! My ass hurts! I knew I didn't trust carriages.

Me and my friend here have adventured all over this land, and let me tell you, if the gods had wanted adventurers to roll around, they would've given us wheels.

Us? We're…well, we're making a delivery. We do that sometimes. Sometimes…someone asks us to.

What about you, girls? I mean, an all-female party can have its own challenges.

What do you mean, "like what"? I mean, you can't ride, and once a month, you…y'know. You need to take rests all the ti—Hrgk!

Pfah! What're you doing? Who just casts Spider Web on a guy all of a sudden?

"I, apologize for my, indelicate, companion…"

…Yeah, yeah. Sorry 'bout…y'know…

But seriously. A party of three girls? You gotta watch out. Not just for monsters and bandits, either. There's some pretty low-down adventurers out there, too. *Beginners, are ya?* they say. *Need some help? Well, looks like your adventure went pretty well! We'll just take a little fee for showing you the ropes!* And if you can't pay—well, if you're lucky, they'll just take your equipment. But if you're not, you can end up shackled with debt.

There have always been more experienced guys who'll take advantage of less-experienced ones. It's not as bad as it used to be, though. They used to just beat the crap out of rookies at the bar and then strip 'em bare.

"That was, twenty, or thirty years, ago, wasn't it?"

What, don't want me to scare 'em with stories of the old days? It's fine. A little fear makes you pay attention. We're not all bad eggs, but we're not all good ones, either.

I mean…we're all word-havers. We all pray just the same, don't we?

Sometimes we’re gonna argue, we’re gonna fight, we’re gonna not like each other. That’s just how it goes.

Oh yeah. Sometimes you see those parties that are, like, all girls except for one guy. Great stuff. If kinda sordid.

Personally, I’m not interested, though. I’m all about love, y’know? Love’s gotta be free!

“……”

Hey, what’d I say to deserve a glare like that?

Anyway, girls, point is—be careful.

I’ve heard there’s been some weird stuff going on around this “water town” lately. And if *he’s* here, that means it’s got to involve goblins.

Get the biggest sword you like, but if they jump you before you can pull it out, it won’t count for nothing.

CHAPTER 8

A Moment's Rest

Warm sunlight streamed from the sky, and a cool breeze blew off the water. People chattered in a lively marketplace, enjoying themselves.

In a place where so many people of different races and creeds gathered, adventurers were hardly an unusual sight. But most adventurers were not a young priestess and a man wearing a steel helm over his head in the middle of town in broad daylight.

"I'm so glad we got good weather!"

"Yes."

Priestess pattered after Goblin Slayer, her lips slightly upturned. She walked gingerly, cradling something carefully in her arms.

"…Want me to hold it?"

"No, I'm fine," she replied with a smile.

"I see," said Goblin Slayer, nodding as he slackened his pace.

Soon his shoulders were level with Priestess's head, and she glanced over at his helmet. The gesture was reminiscent of a puppy enjoying its first walk.

Pedestrians looked at them as they walked by; merchants peeked out from their stalls. Priestess opened her mouth to ask him about this but eventually closed it again without saying anything. This was Goblin Slayer. No doubt he was paying none of it any mind.

What would their friends think if they could see this? She couldn't imagine.

She did know, however, that High Elf Archer, Lizard Priest, and Dwarf Shaman were beneath her feet at that very moment.

"Okay, Orcbolg! You take it easy, now!"

"We will be less one frontline fighter and one spell caster. We will not take any undue risks."

"But I'll tell you what *is* risky: a warrior with no armor!"

The three adventurers had brought up the idea during a meal. Priestess, who was still not quite feeling her usual self, could only bow her head and apologize.

What surprised them, though, was that even Goblin Slayer's response was quite frank:

"Thanks. I'll let you handle it."

Priestess still couldn't fathom what was in his heart of hearts, but by now she had a fairly good idea of how he thought.

The goblins had used that burial chamber as the site for an ambush, meaning it was clearly part of their territory. That meant the adventurers had to search the hidden staircase they had found behind the stone coffin, if for no other reason than that the champion was still alive.

That battle had presumably weakened the goblins significantly, but it had taken its toll on the party as well.

And time was on the goblins' side.

The party had a perfectly capable ranger, monk, and magic user, and they couldn't afford to dawdle. In the meantime, the warrior and the priestess would stay behind to rest their minds and bodies and repair their equipment so as to be prepared for the next excursion.

There was one problem, however.

Perhaps due to the volume of customers, the workshop at the Adventurers Guild here didn't take special orders. When Goblin Slayer had asked for leather armor, a shield, and a sword, he had been refused with a slow shake of the head.

At length, he had determined to go out to buy what he needed, and Priestess had said she would go with him. She questioned him insistently, and although he gave clear answers…

"I know everyone's worried about you. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes."

"Your injuries are healed?"

"Yes."

"Your wounds were much worse than mine."

"Yes."

"You know not to do anything silly now, right?"

"Yes."

"Hrm." Priestess puffed out her cheeks and stopped walking.

Goblin Slayer went several more steps before he noticed. He stopped and looked back; she only stared at him. He cocked his head, clearly unaware of any problem.

"What's wrong?"

"…Sheesh! What do you mean, 'What's wrong'?" Priestess stuck out her finger straight at him. "I'm angry!" She furrowed her eyebrows as hard as she could, but she failed to intimidate.

Partly, it was the stares of people around them. They must have thought the two adventurers were having a lovers' quarrel or maybe that they were siblings fighting. Who could say? Passersby looked suspicious at first, but soon some smiles appeared among them.

"Goblin Slayer—sir! Yes is the only thing you've said this entire conversation!"

"Is it?"

"It is!"

"Is it…?"

"And you say 'Is it' a lot, too!"

"…Hrm."

Goblin Slayer crossed his arms and grunted.

The pair stood silently, surrounded by the babble of the street. Birds flew lazily by in the blue sky above them while he mulled something over for a time. Finally, he gave a slow nod.

"…I will change."

"Please do!" Priestess said and giggled.

When an adventurer this serious said he would change, he surely would. They had only known each other a few months, but she knew that much.

She set off again at a sprightly pace, and Goblin Slayer soon matched her. Before long, they were walking side by side again, Priestess once more level with his shoulders. Somehow, that in itself made her very happy.

"You said something about shopping…?"

"Yes," he replied, then held up his hand as if to say *wait.* Apparently he had something to add.

Another little chuckle escaped Priestess at his unpracticed show of consideration.

"I am going to look at some weapons and armor. Mine are damaged."

Goblin Slayer's helmet was turned toward her. It hid his face and any expression, but red eyes shone faintly within.

"What will you do?"

"Hmm…" Priestess put one slim finger to her lips and tilted her head. The breeze lifted her hair, blew it back behind her head.

She figured the answer to what she was about to say was obvious, but…

"Are you actually trying to ask my opinion?"

"I believe so."

"Gosh…"

Goblin Slayer seemed to think his reply was quite natural. Priestess sighed. For now she would live and let live. "My chain mail was ruined, too," she answered dutifully, composing her expression. "I thought maybe there'd be somewhere I could get it fixed."

"It would probably be quicker to buy new."

Goblin Slayer's answer was completely stone-faced.

He really doesn't get it. Priestess looked up at him with half-closed eyes.

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

This time it was Goblin Slayer's turn to look perplexed.

Priestess clutched the bundle containing her chain mail and murmured, "Because…this is the first thing I did that you praised me for."

Goblin Slayer stopped and looked at her.

Priestess adjusted the bundle in her arms as if to show him a treasure. Shy, she averted her eyes.

"You don't remember? You said it was a little rough but would stop a blade."

"Did I?" His voice seemed somehow strained, and then he whispered, "I suppose I did."

§

They entered a rather prosperous-looking equipment shop.

The clangs of a hammer striking metal came from deep in the store. Weapons and armor were strewn about the dim interior. It had a vitality that was lacking in the guild workshop.

"Wow…" Priestess blinked several times, understandably overwhelmed.

It was full of weapons she had never seen, armor she couldn't imagine how to wear, and one curio after another. She noticed one weapon she did recognize in the midst of it all and picked it up gently with a soft breath.

"They've even got flails." These consisted of two sticks with heavy metal fasteners connected by a chain; they were said to have evolved from a threshing tool. Clergy of the Earth Mother had been known to use them, and Priestess puffed out her little chest proudly at her modicum of knowledge.

"Going to buy it?"

"No…" She scanned the room at Goblin Slayer's blunt question. She lacked the courage to stand in the party's front row, and for personal protection, she had her sounding staff. "…I guess not."

Priestess carefully returned the flail to its shelf, then started as she noticed a man who appeared to be the shopkeeper.

"Um, excuse me…"

"Hmm?" The man eyed her, and Priestess looked to the floor.

He was young, maybe about twenty, but he had the air of a teenager who had only just grown up.

It wasn't that he seemed uncouth. His clothes were neat, his hair and beard well trimmed. But his disinterested answer made him seem oddly cold.

"Hrm. Welcome, welcome. What can I do for you?"

"Ah, ahem… Could you…repair this chain mail?"

Priestess held out her armor hesitantly, and the shopkeeper gave it a once-over. Then, he reached into the hole at the shoulder, spread out the armor, and exhaled.

"That's some hole. Don't you think it'd be better to get a new set?"

"I'd rather…have it repaired…"

"Repair, sure. Customer's always right…"

The man's gaze ran along Priestess's slim arms. Unreserved, lewd, he looked her up and down as if drinking her in.

"Need a makeover, miss?"

"N-no thank you…!" Priestess shook her head, feeling a hot flush in her cheeks.

Was this how shopkeepers in the city normally treated their customers? It would have been unthinkable on the frontier.

Or was he simply making light of her because she was so clearly a novice? The thought pained her.

"I need some repairs done, too."

It was Goblin Slayer. When Priestess raised her eyes again, they were met with a mail-clad back.

Faced with the grimy steel helmet, the shopkeeper let out a strange gurgle.

"A S-Silver rank…," the shopkeeper's voice quaked. Apparently he had noticed the silver tag hanging around Goblin Slayer's neck. "Ah, y-yes, sir. Repairs. Of course, sir."

"My leather armor and my round shield. Quickly, if you don't mind. Along with that chain mail."

"W-would you like them cleaned? And your shield appears to be missing its grip…"

"Don't clean them. And I removed the grip myself."

"Ahem, as to payment, sir, including the rush fee…"

"Don't worry."

Without flinching, Goblin Slayer dug in his bag and dropped a leather purse on the counter. It made a heavy thump as it landed and slumped over. Gold coins spilled from the mouth.

"Th-thank you, sir…!"

"I'll need to have a look at your swords, too."

"Oh, um, I have a mithril blade in at the moment!"

"I don't need it."

His bold, unconcerned stride carried him over to where a variety of swords were mounted on the wall. He took one down with a completely average double-edged blade. It had a long grip: a "one-and-a-half-handed" sword.

"Ahh, if that's the kind of blade you prefer, sir, I have a dwarf-forged…"

"Too long."

He shoved the sword back onto the rack, then started going through merchandise until he came up with a small single-edged sword.

"Are short swords more to your liking, sir? I have an enchanted one found in some ruins…"

"Enchanted?"

"Yes, sir!" The shopkeeper's voice went up an octave. "It keeps the blade from dulling, of course, but also sounds an alarm when enemies are near."

"I don't need it." His tone was blunt enough to be a weapon itself. "I'll take this one. It's a bit long, but I can grind it down myself. I'll borrow your whetstone while we wait for our repairs."

"B-but, sir… With a blade like that, the best you could hope to hunt is…goblins…"

"That's what I plan to do."

The shopkeeper had nothing to say to that.

But Goblin Slayer, as ever, seemed to take no notice. Perhaps he was trying to say to her: *Don't let it get to you.*

He was a hard one to fathom.

Priestess turned faintly red and let out a soft, quiet sigh.

§

"Hee-hee… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"What?"

"B-because you—He—"

As they left the shop after having their repairs done, an afternoon breeze swirled around them. The blue sky shone with the early summer sun, and the babbling of a nearby stream was pleasant to their ears.

"I—I know I shouldn't laugh, but…"

Priestess wiped tears from the corners of her eyes, her laugh as clear as a bell.

The flummoxed shopkeeper had tried to say something as Goblin Slayer ground the sword shorter and shorter, but—

"'I'm only going to throw it; it doesn't matter'!"

"It's true, isn't it?"

"But the face he made! It was incredible!"

"Was it?"

"Yes, it was!" Priestess finally managed between gales of laughter.

She presumed this behavior was not becoming for a disciple of the Earth Mother, but it certainly felt good. Her conscience berated her, so she also sent up a little prayer: *Just a bit won't hurt anything, will it?*

Just then…

"Step right up! Delicious, melt-in-your-mouth 'ice crème'! It's a taste sensation!"

A voice rang out above the din, along with a jangling handbell.

"Ice crème…?"

Curiosity brought Priestess to a standstill in front of a cramped stall. Children cheered and rushed across the paved street to give the owner their change.

"I wonder what that place is selling."

From this distance, it was hard to tell, but judging by the children's expressions, it was some kind of sweet.

Priestess peeked at Goblin Slayer, who nodded and said, "Go ahead."

"Yes, sir! Thank you!"

Priestess gave a deep bob of her head, all smiles, then ran off, her hair flowing behind her.

She was a little embarrassed to line up with the children, but…

I'm still only fifteen myself.

It was just a difference of two or three years, she told herself. And finally she got one of the sweets for herself.

Ice crème turned out to look like melting white ice. It had a bright red cherry on top, perhaps to give it some color. Priestess spooned some of the treat out of its crispy, fried bowl and into her mouth.

"W-wow!"

Instantly, her cheeks flushed, and a smile blossomed on her face. She turned to Goblin Slayer with a mix of surprise and excitement.

"This is amazing! It's cold and sweet—!"

"You like it?"

"Yes, very much! At the Temple, we didn't get to eat many sweet things…" She smiled bashfully with a small giggle. "I feel like I'm breaking the rules…just a little."

"I see. Hmm. An iced treat."

Goblin Slayer observed the stall with a certain amount of fascination.

The ice crème was stored in a well-cooled metal vessel. It would be scooped out and piled in the bowls. As far as he could tell, there was no sign of magic involved.

That was to say, the tanned shopkeeper did not appear to be any kind of wizard.

"…This is no spell. How do you make it?"

"Wellll, I gotta say it's a mystery to me how it works." The shopkeeper didn't seem bothered by the question; he continued to smile as he slid a lid over the vessel. "Some professor discovered that water cools faster if you put some impurities in it."

"Hmm?"

"And if ye add more of the stuff to the ice, it gets even icier!"

"I see."

"Want some chilled wine? Easy with this stuff, believe you me—works on fruit, too."

"Hmm."

"So he thought, what if you tried it on cow's milk? And here we are!"

"I see. Very interesting." He sounded as intrigued as a child who had learned the secret to a magic trick. It was such an unfamiliar tone for him that it caused Priestess to blink several times.

Goblin Slayer took a large gold coin out of his pouch and gave it to the shopkeeper.

"One, please. Keep the change."

"Certainly, sir!"

The ecstatic shopkeeper scooped out the ice crème with a practiced movement. Goblin Slayer watched him, transfixed.

"…Hee-hee."

Goblin Slayer looked back, mystified by the chuckle that escaped Priestess.

"What?"

"Nothing. I just finally figured out how you came to know so much, sir."

"…I see."

Maybe it would be nice to sit down calmly instead of standing while they ate. At Priestess's suggestion, the two of them settled on a bench along the roadside.

They sat side by side, spooning the treat into their mouths and savoring its chill and sweetness on their tongues, watching the crowds go by.

When Priestess stole a sideways glance, she found him eating through his visor, as usual.

Warm sunlight filtered through the trees. A cool breeze blew across the water. People chattered merrily. Well-dressed men and women passed by, while children dashed about with huge smiles on their faces. Horse-drawn carriages rumbled along the neatly laid flagstones.

"It's strange, isn't it?" Priestess whispered, furrowing her brow at the scene. “None of these people have any idea there are goblins right under their feet…”

“…Yes.”

“Some people have been hurt, and I’m sure…they’re probably afraid of that, but…”

But nobody seemed to really care. Not the clerk at the equipment shop. Not the ice crème seller. No one whiling away the hours here.

What about her frontier town? She had felt the threat of monsters was real and near, but…

“…When I was little…,” he murmured.

“What…?”

“There was a time when I thought that if I took a single step, the earth might open up beneath me and I would die.”

“Huh…?”

The spoon went still in Priestess’s hand as Goblin Slayer spoke.

“I was afraid to walk at all.”

The cherry tumbled from the top of her melted ice crème and rolled to the bottom. She ignored it and focused on Goblin Slayer’s face, even though she could not see his expression behind his helmet.

“Such a thing is not impossible. But nobody ever worried about it. I found that strange.”

But he seemed to laugh quietly.

“My sister laughed at me—and so did *she*—but it was quite some time before I realized that, scared or not, I had to walk.”

“Is that…? Is that right?”

“That is right.”

The wind slipped between them, bringing with it a sibilance of leaves.

“But even now, I am terribly afraid.”

Of what and why, he did not say. Nor did Priestess consider asking.

It had only been a few months since they’d met, but she had been with him constantly all that time. There was no way she could fail to understand.

“I appreciate your help,” Goblin Slayer said, forcing himself to sound detached and cool, as usual. “But your help is not strictly necessary.”

Priestess didn’t answer.

She looked down and swirled her spoon aimlessly in her melted ice crème. Finally, she picked up the cherry and popped it into her mouth. Amid the bittersweet taste was the hard pit.

She puffed out her cheeks, affecting a sulk.

"You said to do what I liked, didn't you?"

"Did I?"

"Yes, you did."

"…"

"…You really are beyond help."

Goblin Slayer looked up at the blue sky, as if unsure whether he should respond to this.

Priestess toyed with the stem of the cherry between her lips, paying no regard to etiquette.

Finally, she said just one short word.

"Sorry."

"I don't want to hear that."

"…Sorry."

"…Not that I really care."

"I mean, there are things that scare me, too," she whispered.

Whether the words reached his ears or not, she wasn't sure.

"…That's cold!"

A drop of the melted ice crème dribbled onto her hand, provoking her surprised exclamation. She looked awkwardly at Goblin Slayer and wiped the drop away with a handkerchief.

The crispy treat that served as a bowl had completely soaked through.

"…Hrk."

She stuffed the rest of the dessert into her mouth, and the chill gave her a headache. She discreetly wiped away the tears that jumped to her eyes, pretending they weren't there; then she rose.

"Okay! Shall we go now, Goblin Slayer, si—"

"Goblin Slayer! There you are!"

Priestess stopped dead. She was sure she recognized that spirited voice, but she certainly hadn't expected to hear it here.

She looked up to see a tough-looking adventurer in blue armor, carrying a spear—it was Spearman.

"What's the big idea, summoning a guy by letter…? I'm telling on you to Guild Girl!"

"Telling her what?"

"That you and this girl were having a little date!"

"We're shopping."

Goblin Slayer brushed past Spearman, who had come on full force just as he did at home.

Nearby, Priestess turned slightly red and hurried to straighten up, although there was no point.

"Heh, heh, heh-heh."

Witch was all well-formed limbs, and she stuck to Spearman as closely as a shadow. Her eyes played over Priestess, then closed a little, alluringly. Priestess found herself swallowing heavily.

"Ah, um…"

"You seem, well. That's, good."

"Ah yes, ma'am."

Priestess hurriedly got up from the bench and bowed her head, then reached up to straighten her cap.

She found Witch a very impressive woman and was loath to embarrass herself in front of the spell caster. She cleared her throat quietly.

"Ahem… And… What brings you here? Do you have work here, too?"

"Yes, work. That's, quite, correct."

A snicker. Her answer, like her laugh, seemed shrouded in smoke. Priestess wasn't sure if the spell caster was teasing her.

Witch produced a long pipe from somewhere or other with a wave of her hand and lit it with a murmur of "*Inflammarae*."

A sweet aroma drifted from it. Cloaked in the smell, Witch said, "Come on," and gave Spearman a tap on the elbow.

"…Feh."

Spearman continued to glare at Goblin Slayer, and after a moment, he gave one sharp click of his tongue.

"Listen up."

"Hmm."

"Sheesh. I'm not your delivery boy, got it? You dragged me all the way out here to bring you this…"

He gave Goblin Slayer a hempen pouch with something stuffed inside it. It looked heavy.

Goblin Slayer tucked it neatly into his bag. His helmet turned toward Spearman, and he said dispassionately, "Sorry. Thanks for the help."

"…Hrg."

"I asked you because you are the most easygoing and trustworthy adventurer I know."

"...Hrrrrgg...!!"

"Heh, heh, heh-heh."

Witch seemed quite unable to contain her laughter, and Spearman glared daggers at her.

Naturally, Witch paid him no mind, and the stare got him nowhere.

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"…Need any more bodies? We might be able to help you out… for a reward, of course."

"No. We'll manage."

Priestess looked at Witch and blushed slightly.

Ever since their battle against the goblins, the two spell casters seemed to have come to understand each other on some level.

"Anyway, ain't they got stuff like this around here? Buy local!"

"I can't use the local variety." Was that embarrassment, or regret, or both? Goblin Slayer shook his head at Spearman's complaint. "It isn't fine enough."

"Whatever you say." Spearman shrugged, doing his best to convey annoyance and disinterest simultaneously. "What're you gonna use it for, anyway?"

"I think you know."

Priestess's smile deepened. Yes, of course. He always had just one thing in mind. True, that was what worried her sometimes, what made her unable to leave him alone……

"Goblin slaying."

He was completely beyond help.

§

Thus Priestess and Goblin Slayer parted ways with Spearman and Witch, finished their shopping, and headed back. The long summer day was edging toward twilight, the red evening sun casting long shadows. Even in exaggerated silhouette, Priestess only came up to his shoulders.

"……"

She looked absently up at him—or the helmet that hid his expression.

Will I ever catch up with him?

The rank tag that dangled around her own neck was Obsidian. The ninth rank. A long way from his Silver.

He was called Goblin Slayer for goblins were all he ever fought. It had been months since she'd met him. There were some things she understood now, but there were others she didn't. And there were some things he'd taught her, and others he hadn't.

"…Oh."

Coming out of her reverie, she realized they had already reached their destination.

The burble of water was quite loud now, and when she looked up, there was the Temple of Law.

And three adventurers fully equipped.

A smile spread across Priestess's face. In the evening sun, it looked like a rose blooming.

"Everyone! You made it back."

"You better believe we did! Sheesh, that was rough!" High Elf Archer waved, looking tired but unconcerned. "When we got back to the surface, you guys hadn't returned yet. So…"

"Naturally, we were just talking about whether to come meet you." Beside her, Dwarf Shaman stroked his white beard and slapped his protruding belly. "Well, we had a few close calls. Let us regale you over dinner."

"Hold on, dwarf! Talking about work at mealtime is not allowed! Not allowed!"

"Oh, everything's 'not allowed' with you! How do you expect to get a man like that?"

"Hrn…!"

High Elf Archer demanded just what he meant by that, her ears lying flat.

Dwarf Shaman, of course, had a comeback ready, and soon they were at it as usual.

"Gosh. It's always nice to see you two getting along so well."

When they had first met, Priestess had tried to stop these arguments, but now she was used to them.

Goblin Slayer glanced over at their lively banter but soon looked away.

"Tell me. What close calls? …Did they involve goblins?"

"I am afraid it is not a story best told while we stand here." Lizard Priest rumbled in his throat and slapped his tail against the ground. "Let us hold council inside the Temple."

"Well, in that case…," Priestess broke in with an idea. She passed the bundle she was holding to Lizard Priest, who reached out to take it. It included her personal equipment, along with provisions for the entire party. They would all have to look it over together. "I'll make dinner tonight. Let's all talk after that."

"I have no objection. Milord Goblin Slayer?"

“I don’t mind, either,” came the dispassionate answer.

Priestess pursed her lips. This was the moment of truth.

“Okay, Goblin Slayer, sir. During dinner, you have to talk about something other than goblins.”

“Hr…”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Lizard Priest’s eyes rolled merrily in his head, and he touched his tongue to his nose. “One must respect the requests of one’s traveling companions. Come, you two, we’re going in.”

High Elf Archer and Dwarf Shaman fell silent when he hissed at them—as ever.

Lizard Priest ushered them rather bodily inside. Priestess made to follow them, but:

“…?”

“——————”

Suddenly she realized that Goblin Slayer, next to her, had stopped where he was.

In the long shadows cast by the crimson sun, he stood alone. He looked like a child whose friends had drifted home while he was caught up in his games.

Priestess wasn’t sure what brought the image to mind.

“Goblin Slayer, sir? Shall we go?”

“…Yes…,” he murmured when she called to him. “Hmm.

“Companions.” He rolled the unfamiliar word around in his mouth. “…I suppose they are.”

Then Goblin Slayer and Priestess followed slowly after them—their companions.

INTERLUDE

Of the Slaying of the Evil Sect

No! Dammit! Damndamndamndamn, *gygax* it all!

How could we fumble so badly?! How could this happen?!

To think our ritual site has been found—!

We were to establish ourselves beneath the city, invading quietly, attracting sacrifices for the goblins until the rite of the resurrection was ready. All we needed was to turn the goblins loose, let them kidnap a few women.

If we only had that *charm,* that magical item, we could summon our lord, the Dark God…

I knew we should have gotten rid of that wily archbishop—a thorn in our side.

The first to feel our wrath will be that accursed Sword Maiden, who prevented our miracle ten years ago. How can she still call herself *Maiden,* after we defiled her to her most secret places? That is why—Argh!

Why are all the goblins murdered?! Where did I go wrong?! Our plans were perfect! Decisive!

No. Your plans were no such thing.

Th-th-th-that voice! My most vaunted lord! Have mercy on this, your humble servant! Bless me with the merest scrap of your power!

No. But look and see.

Hrr—?!

"*Hold it right there, villain!* Hah! I always wanted to say that!"

"Why would you purposely throw away the element of surprise?"

"Aw, you gotta announce yourself. If you can provoke the other guy, you can get him to focus his attacks on you."

Women with black hair—two of them… Adventurers?!

Why?! How?! How did you discover our sect's hiding place?!

"Critically good luck!"

Wha—?!

“We know all about your plans!”

“Know this: You have nowhere to run!”

No—impossible! A sorcerer *and* a swordmaster? Surely—surely—!

I see now. It was *you*! It was *you*, I see now! Curse you—sworn enemy of my lord, the Dark God! Receive what is coming to you—here and now!

“Heroes on the case!!”

CHAPTER 9

THE MONSTER THAT MUST NOT BE NAMED

“When I say predicament, I mean—*that* thing,” Dwarf Shaman said when the explorers reunited the next day.

In the deepest reaches of the catacombs, they had found a room like a chapel. Benches of carved stone filled the small room, at the end of which was an altar. A full-length mirror was set in the wall, its surface strangely watery. It was huge, nearly the size of a large battle shield. Perhaps an object of worship.

If so, then this room was a temple or at least some holy place.

They had taken the hidden staircase, which went down and down until, at last, it began to climb again. And at its farthest extremity had been this hall.

And the problem—the predicament—was resting there.

“Wh-what…is that…?” Priestess asked in a small voice, peeking out from the shadows of the hallway.

High Elf Archer, long ears drooping, shook her head.

“We don’t know. But…I think it’s an eyeball.”

At first glance, one might describe it as a flying eyeball.

The massive eye was almost the height of a person. It floated just above the floor, waiting for the adventurers in the middle of the room.

The monster’s geometrically shaped bloodshot pupil turned this way and that. From its eyelid—if you could call it that—grew wiggling feelers. On the end of each was an eye, a vast number of them. Each one seemed to be a miniature version of the main eye in a way that was hard to describe, and each bore a glinting twinkle. Its mouth was full of sharp teeth that suggested a large cat. It seemed most unlikely to be friendly.

The creature must have noticed them watching it from the hall, but it showed no reaction. It seemed impossible that it hadn’t seen them. It simply hadn’t yet recognized them as a threat.

It was a truly unhallowed, otherworldly thing, a blight on this sacred place.

“From its appearance alone, I am willing to guess it’s an agent of chaos,” Lizard Priest said, his eyes narrowing in displeasure. “At the least, it was not created by any god of order.”

“It might serve to our credit to get rid of it, but we’re not sure what it is,” Dwarf Shaman grumbled with a shrug.

“It’s one of those monsters whose…whose name must not be spoken,” Priestess replied, quivering.

On an adventure, few things are more dangerous than challenging a foe you know nothing about. If you can’t establish your front and rear lines, so much the worse.

Three of the explorers had come face-to-face with this strange creature while investigating the ruins the day before. It was Lizard Priest, their best fighter, who had ordered them to avoid combat and determined to make a tactical withdrawal the previous day.

Wasn’t this a bit beyond goblin slaying? And shouldn’t they ask their quest giver, Sword Maiden, for her instructions?

“That doesn’t matter,” Goblin Slayer said unhesitatingly. “This is still goblin slaying.”

After that, there was no arguing with him. The party had not wanted to come down here in the first place.

But what were adventurers who didn’t occasionally leap into dangers unknown? Safely, of course.

Now, seeing the creature in the chapel, Goblin Slayer said, “Giant Eye will do for a name.”

“Never one to get too fancy, were you?” Dwarf Shaman said with a touch of sarcasm.

“Referring to the Bug-Eyed Monster as a Giant Eye,” Lizard Priest said, his eyes rolling in amusement.

“Not bad. I’ll go with that.” High Elf Archer nodded, her ears bobbing. She set an arrow in her bow and tugged the string gently.

“And,” said Priestess, pulling her sounding staff close to her, “what do you plan to do about this…Giant Eye? I guess we should start with Protection?”

No one objected to the idea.

“Then, in accordance with our custom, allow me to go out front. The more tanks we have, the better.”

“I’ll stand back here and shoot like I always do, okay?”

“Now, what about yours truly…?” Dwarf Shaman stroked his beard and looked up at the ceiling. Some tree roots had spread through the old stone. The party was probably well outside the city now, no longer under the streets of the water town. The plant life that had been growing in the fields for who knew how many years had penetrated all the way down here. Before many more centuries had passed, these ruins would probably belong wholly to the trees.

It was simply a reminder: None could best time.

"No matter how you look at it, that is a Giant Eye."

"Trying to be funny, dwarf?"

"Keep it to yourself, long-ears. I'm dead serious."

Dwarf Shaman grimly waved away the elf's tease.

Dragons breathed fire, harpies sang, and snakes had their poison… Giant Eyes were able to see.

One would not survive underestimating all those wriggling tentacles, nor the sinister eye that lurked below them.

"We take away its vision," Goblin Slayer muttered. "I don't care how. Can you do it?"

"Sure as stone." Nodding, Dwarf Shaman dug in his bag of catalysts, then began to run his hand over the ground beneath his feet. "Gnomes are well and good. But how about I whip up a Spirit Wall?"

"All right."

Dwarf Shaman nodded firmly and gave his belly a smack.

The conversation over, Goblin Slayer set to checking his own weapons and equipment.

Everything looked like it would function as good as brand-new, but his well-used leather armor was broken in, and that pleased him. He fixed his small shield firmly to his left arm; the sword he had ground down was good for use in a confined space. Everything in his item bag was in order. Last was, as always, his grimy helmet.

It was awfully poor stuff for an adventurer. Even a beginner would have better-looking equipment.

But those who knew who this man was would never belittle him for it. Goblin Slayer had exactly what he needed.

"You could try to look a *little* cooler," High Elf Archer said with a chuckle.

"Yeah…," Priestess said, scrunching up her face in thought before giving a little clap. "I've got it! How about a feather in your helmet, Goblin Slayer, sir?"

"Not interested."

He summarily dismissed the girls' input, then rose to his feet.

High Elf Archer looked with surprise at the lantern bobbing at his hip.

"Hey, Orcbolg. No torch today?"

"There's something I want to try. Fire would only get in the way," he said and carefully closed the window of the lantern. "Let's go."

At his signal, the adventurers leaped into the room and took their usual battle formation. The dwarf and the priestess stood in back, focusing themselves so they could offer their spells and prayers.

At first, the Giant Eye only goggled at the boorish intrusion.

It was Priestess who first realized this was actually the creature's way of attacking.

"*O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are wea*— Ahh!"

"BEBBEBEBEBEHOOOO!!"

Her eyes went wide as she was thrown into the air by an invisible shock wave.

High Elf Archer gave a shout as Priestess thrashed, then crumpled and fell.

"Are you all right?!" she called loudly, trying to run even as she maintained a line of sight to shoot. Priestess sat up, panting.

"Ye…yes…" Pale and kneeling, she nodded.

That brutal gaze had violently severed the thread of spirit that connected her to the gods above. It felt as if her soul itself had sustained the blow, and her spirit ached bitterly.

But that was not what got her attention when she stood, still clinging to her staff.

"I can't… I can't use spells…!"

The cry ran through the party before anyone could cast anything. They had two priests and a shaman. More than half the party was spell casters. The ability to use magic was nothing less than a matter of life and death for them.

"It's that eye!" Dwarf Shaman exclaimed, grinding his teeth. "Beard-cutter, give 'im hell!"

"Certainly."

As he spoke, Goblin Slayer pulled an egg out of his item bag and launched it at the creature. It flew straight into its target, shattering into a cloud of blackish-red smoke—tear gas.

"OOOOODEEARARARA?!?!"

The stinging stuff flew into all of its many eyes, drawing a bellow of dismay from the monster. Of course, the Giant Eye was on an altogether different level from any goblin, and this trick was not enough to do it any damage.

However—

"All riiight, here I come!"

—it was more than enough to get them their turn to act.

Dwarf Shaman tumbled in, grabbing a handful of dirt from his bag and flinging it into the air in one smooth motion.

"Come out, you gnomes, it's time to build! Let all this space with earth be filled! Fear no wind and fear no waves—a solid wall keeps them at bay!"

He scattered the dust as he chanted.

Then Dwarf Shaman dropped what looked like a child's toy version of a stone wall on the floor.

It grew as they watched, until a full-fledged earthen battlement stood before them.

Spirit Wall was like Protection, but took physical rather than immaterial form. And unlike a Protection barrier, it was impossible to see through a Spirit Wall.

"What do you think of that?"

But he seemed to have gotten the attention of the Giant Eye, which had presently cleared away the tear gas.

Its squirming tentacles turned toward the Spirit Wall and glinted maliciously.

"BEEEHOOOOLLLL!!"

In the next instant, a dazzling light filled the sacred space.

"Hrrg—!"

"This will not do!"

"Hu—Wha—?!"

Goblin Slayer and Lizard Priest shouted and jumped back. Dwarf Shaman grunted.

A single red line ran down the face of the Spirit Wall, bubbling up even as they watched, melting through it…

"It's hot—!"

"Ahh no!"

Priestess cried out as the exploding wall caught her. Dwarf Shaman supported her as best he could as he helped them both to flee from the debris. No sooner had it burst through their barrier than the light vanished, leaving scorch marks on the floor of the chapel.

Heat vision? No…

It was an intense form of Disintegrate loosed by one of the Giant Eye's tentacle eyeballs.

"Those evil eyes are capable of Dispel and Disintegrate!" Even their great melee fighter, Lizard Priest, could only keep his distance. No matter how tough his scales, they couldn't deflect Disintegrate. He wanted to summon a Dragontooth Warrior as a sort of wall of his own, but it was only too clear the Giant Eye would simply give it a glare and dispel it.

But then, to lash out with his claws and fangs and tail, making a weapon of himself, put him at risk of the heat ray.

"J-just what are we supposed to do about this thing?!"

"For now, fall back!"

While High Elf Archer tried to mount an attack, Goblin Slayer's response was sharp and sure. He drew his sword in his right hand and held up his shield on his left, putting Dwarf Shaman and Priestess behind him.

"Got it…!"

The elf sought safety there as well, taking the last few steps at a leap.

"BEBEBEBEBEEEEHOO!!"

"Hwa?!"

She hopped to avoid the impact at her feet. The heat ray singed off a few strands of her hair, and she cursed once or twice in elvish. She tumbled haphazardly but found herself near Goblin Slayer.

"Are you all right?"

"Huh?!" High Elf Archer jumped back, long ears trembling in surprise. "I'm fine… Thanks."

"I see."

"Now, this is trouble indeed…" Lizard Priest, who had crawled back so as to avoid the heat ray, gave a laborious sigh.

"BEEHOHOHO…"

The Giant Eye showed no further sign of attacking, apparently satisfied to have driven the adventurers out of the chapel. It floated back to where it had started, watching the entranceway again.

"It looks like…as long as we don't…go in the room…it won't attack us," Priestess said, breathing raggedly and slumping against the wall. "It must be…protecting this place."

"Doesn't matter for now. Rest… Here, water."

"Oh, th-thank you…"

High Elf Archer wetted her lips with one or two swigs from her canteen, then held it out to Priestess. The young woman took it with both hands, then drank delicately, swallowing almost inaudibly.

"I think…if it couldn't see me, I could perform the miracle…"

"But get within spitting distance, and it'll sure see you." Dwarf Shaman didn't try to hide his frustration as he sat down heavily. "We can't use spells, and it's got a heat ray and more extremities than all of us put together. We can't win!"

"No," Goblin Slayer said, rifling through his item bag. "There's something I want to try."

"I just want to remind you, fire, water, and poison gas are off-limits."

"I remember," Goblin Slayer said calmly to High Elf Archer, who had narrowed her eyes at him. "I didn't bring any implements of fire or water with me. And I doubt poison would work."

High Elf Archer gave a little sniff and muttered, "Fine," giving her ears a deliberate shake.

"Just to be sure, we are outside of town, right?"

"I should think so," Dwarf Shaman said, perking up his ears and cocking his head. "We walked quite a ways, and the feeling here is definitely different."

"No problem, then."

"Then it's decided," Lizard Priest said, clapping his hands. "As we've no other ingenious ideas and we must eliminate that accursed fiend, we shall rely on milord Goblin Slayer's tactic."

"Thank you," Goblin Slayer said with a nod. His helmet turned toward High Elf Archer. "I need that creature distracted, just for a second. I need someone to go inside and start running. Can you do it?"

"Leave it to me!" High Elf Archer nodded enthusiastically, her ears twitching up and down.

"Can you cast Stupor? I don't want it to be able to use its heat ray."

"From here?" Dwarf Shaman stroked his beard, then held up his thumb and closed one eye.

He stretched out his arm toward the Giant Eye in the chapel as if to take aim, judging the distance.

"By the number of flagstones, I'd say… Right. I think it will work!" He gave an incongruous smile and slapped his belly as if to emphasize his boast.

Good. Goblin Slayer nodded and turned next to Lizard Priest.

"We need a Dragontooth Warrior. One is enough. Can you do it?"

"I am somewhat worried about that Dispel…"

"I'll make sure it can't see."

"Without that evil eye, I think it can be done. You can count on me." He rolled his eyes in enjoyment.

"Finally," Goblin Slayer said, looking at Priestess, "when I give the signal, I want you to cast Protection on the entrance."

She swallowed heavily and faced him as squarely as she could.

"Will you be able to do it?"

"…Yes, sir! It'll be fine!" She held her sounding staff firmly with both hands and gave a deep nod. "Let's do it!"

And so the battle began.

"Well, if all I have to do is not get fried…"

The Giant Eye rolled about to look at High Elf Archer as she came dashing into the room, as fleet-footed as a hare. She moved her svelte legs, running on top of the benches through the hall.

The Giant Eye floated through the air, its gaze following her in the most literal sense. Its stalks full of eyeballs began to get that dangerous glint.

"BEBEBEBEBEHOHOOOOOL!!"

"Ohhh boy, here it comes, here it comes…"

Shouting in a voice too high to be coquettish and too soft to be a scream, High Elf Archer leaped out of the way. Obviously, not even an elf is quicker than the speed of light. Dodging an eye as it tries to take aim, though? That's a different story.

The beam flashed soundlessly, burning High Elf Archer's silhouette onto the ancient walls and floor.

There's some satisfaction in that, she thought, smiling as she danced nimbly away.

Her elder sister or her cousin, both much more experienced than she, might have managed even more. It should have been easy enough to shoot at the Giant Eye while tumbling away from its Disintegrate.

She still had much to learn. But she was not the first of her brethren to follow this path.

She knew she had time to spare. Time was always on the side of an elf. At least, so long as she didn't get herself killed.

That meant the future was less important than focusing everything she had on the present moment. High Elf Archer vaulted boldly around the room without worry, without fear.

Nothing could have been more infuriating to the Giant Eye.

"OOOOOLLDER!!"

The great main eye spun faster, trying to launch more attacks and more precisely.

"Oh-ho! That's my long-ears! She seems to be doing well for herself."

This meant the creature took its eyes—all of them—off Dwarf Shaman, who was laughing merrily near the entrance to the chapel.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a red jug full of wine. An exquisite fragrance drifted out as he unstoppered it and tossed it back so quickly a few drops dribbled into his long beard.

He sloshed it around in his mouth, then blew it gleefully into the air.

"Drink deep, sing loud, let the spirits lead you! Sing loud, step quick, and when to sleep they see you, may a jar of fire wine be in your dreams to greet you!"

And indeed, the spray of spirits rolled across the room and enveloped the Giant Eye.

"BE…DERRRR…?"

It began to wobble in the air, looking like it might just fall to the ground.

No one knew what the agent of chaos dreamed when it finally fell asleep.

"Ahh," Dwarf Shaman said happily, "just look what a man can do when he's not being stared down by a floating eyeball of death." He wiped his mouth with his glove.

"…Good." At Dwarf Shaman's nod, Goblin Slayer came bounding into the chapel. He moved with nothing like the lightness of High Elf Archer, but still showed impressive agility for someone in full armor.

As he ran, he scattered something from a pouch he had taken out of his item bag. Before long, a dense trail of white dust was floating behind him.

"What's that, Orcbolg?" asked High Elf Archer.

"Wheat flour. Don't breathe it in."

"I'm sure I don't know what you've got in mind, but you could've said that sooner."

She frowned and covered her mouth, but he ignored her as he tossed the wheat flour all around.

It wasn't long before the cramped chapel was filled with the stuff.

Now the stupefied Giant Eye—along with everything else more than an inch in front of their faces—was hidden from view.

"Ho, Beard-cutter, long-ears! The spell won't last much longer!"

Before Goblin Slayer could answer the dwarf, High Elf Archer was moving.

"This way, Orcbolg!"

The elf's heightened senses let her get by without her sight. Goblin Slayer followed the clear voice out of the chapel.

"Hrrah!"

As Goblin Slayer came out, Lizard Priest stepped forward, tossing a huge number of fangs inside the entrance. The bones quickly swelled and joined, rising up in the form of a warrior bearing a sword and shield. The adventurers were quite used to these fearsome skeletons by now, and this one headed wordlessly into the hall.

Watching it disappear into the quicklime smoke, Lizard Priest opened his mouth.

"Milord Goblin Slayer, I trust my Dragontooth Warrior, but even it cannot win against Disintegrate."

"Not a problem," Goblin Slayer said and turned to High Elf Archer and Priestess. "Fire an arrow. If you can hit the monster, that will be enough."

"That'll break the effects of Stupor, though."

"Doesn't matter. Then you immediately cast Protection on the entranceway." He continued calmly: "Your role is crucial. If you falter, we all die."

"Y-yes, sir!" She nodded as confidently as she could, squeezing her staff with both hands.

"You really couldn't think of a better way to put that?" High Elf Archer grumbled, but she nocked an arrow into her bow. The spider-silk string whispered as she drew it tight, fixing the target of the tree-branch shaft.

Elven archers aim not with the eyes, but with the mind.

"…!"

The arrow flew; they could not even hear it slice through the air, only see the weaving silhouette as it penetrated the cloud of dust.

But she didn't need to see anything to know what had happened.

"I got it!"

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, by the power of the land grant safety to we who are weak…!"

This time the Earth Mother was able to grant the miracle her humble follower prayed for.

An invisible wall sealed the entrance to the chapel. Dwarf Shaman blinked several times.

"The powder—a sealed room—hold on, you can't possibly—"

Goblin Slayer shouted:

"Plug your ears, open your mouths—and duck!"

§

"BE…HOOLLLOOHOHOHO!!"

The Giant Eye was roused from its stupor by a sudden piercing pain.

It found its eye run through by a bud-tipped arrow. There was dust everywhere; it could barely see.

But it could make out the humanoid silhouette coming toward it, weapon in hand. Would these intruders never learn? If the creature had anything we would recognize as feelings, it was probably quite annoyed at that moment.

It swept around, opening its eye wide and taking aim with its tentacle eyes. Its terrible Disintegrate built up enough heat to do critical damage, and its light began to glow…

"LDEEERRRRRRRR!!!"

At first, Priestess didn't know what had happened.

She thought perhaps the place had been struck by lightning.

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It was an explosion.

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She had heard a series of popping sounds; then the room had been enveloped in a fireball. As it expanded, it decimated everything in the chapel, overwhelming all with its roar and the fury of its heat.

"Hu—ah!"

Priestess covered her face; even on the far side of the Protection barrier, it was hot enough to burn.

At the edge of her constricted vision, she could see High Elf Archer curled into a ball and desperately covering her ears. Dust fell from overhead, and the ruins shook so violently she wondered if the entire structure might not come crashing down.

Finally, the billowing smoke began to clear.

"…Look," Goblin Slayer said shortly. He had crouched down but seemed otherwise unfazed.

High Elf Archer took an obedient peek into the chapel and saw that the Giant Eye was still there.

Up above.

It must have been thrown upward and slammed into the ceiling by the explosion. The blackened monster's tentacles squirmed pathetically. One after another, they fell irresistibly away, as if they were being pulled off…

Splork.

They made a disgusting, meaty sound as they struck the floor in the middle of the room. The creature was just a crisped hunk of flesh now. It thrashed several times, spewing some kind of liquid, then finally stopped moving.

Thus, the Watcher, the monster of chaos summoned from another realm, met its end.

"…Seems to have done the trick," Dwarf Shaman said flatly. He started to rise sluggishly.

Lizard Priest offered a hand, flicking his tongue. "Wheat flour, milord Goblin Slayer? What exactly did you do?"

"Something I heard from a coal miner." Goblin Slayer entered the chapel with his usual bold, nonchalant stride. "He said that if a spark is lit in a room full of powder, it spreads quickly and then explodes."

He drew his sword and drove it into the creature on the ground, making sure there was no reaction. "But it was more trouble to prepare than I expected. And there's too much risk of the fire spreading uncontrollably. Altogether too dangerous." Goblin Slayer shook his head and muttered, "It won't be any use against goblins."

"*And* it was an explosion!" High Elf Archer put her ears back and laid into Goblin Slayer.

As well she should. Hadn't he promised? But he was unmoved by her accusation.

"It wasn't an attack by fire, or water, or poison gas."

"You're missing the point! You—ahhh, never mind."

Sighing, High Elf Archer entered the worship hall in wonder.

I know his heart's in the right place, but he's not very good at keeping to the spirit of his promises.

Luckily for them, with the Giant Eye dispatched, there seemed to be no further signs of life in the room. That agent of chaos seemed to have been the boss of this dungeon.

Maybe that alligator, swimming around like it owned the place, had been the ruins' previous master. Whatever the case, there had been a change of ownership.

"Umm… What did you plan to do if it didn't explode?" Priestess asked, keeping pace with Goblin Slayer with pattering steps.

"As one of you said, this thing seemed interested only in defending this spot," he answered, nudging the creature with his toe. "We would have shot arrows at it from the hall, then run before it could collect itself. We would have done that until it died."

Goblin Slayer nodded as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

"It takes time, but it's reliable."

"Yuck. Wouldn't that make me the one who had to do all the work? Give me a break!" High Elf Archer had completed her inspection of the area, satisfied that they were safe.

Nearby, Dwarf Shaman stroked his beard, trying not to laugh at her resigned tone.

"It would be a problem for you, wouldn't it? With all that exercise, you'd never plumpen up, and you'll be an anvil forever!"

"Look who's talking. As if you couldn't stand to lose a few pounds."

"Don't be silly. Dwarves are the very picture of an excellent physique!"

Lizard Priest shrugged happily and rolled his eyes in his head; Priestess put a hand to her mouth and giggled.

Even High Elf Archer found herself drawn to chuckle, and Dwarf Shaman's booming laugh followed her.

Goblin Slayer didn't laugh, but…

"…

"Phew…" With a breath, he sheathed the sword he had been holding in his right hand until that moment.

The tense atmosphere that had dominated their explorations melted away, giving way to a surprising feeling of comfort.

They had won.

§

"Now, then… This is most intriguing."

The last laugh had echoed away in the dim chapel.

Lizard Priest pointed quietly to the thing that still hung above the altar: a gigantic full-length mirror. The surface of it trembled like water, weird ripples spreading across it.

The mirror and the beguiling, intricate metalwork surrounding it had not been so much as scuffed by the explosion. It couldn't be more obvious that this was not a normal looking glass.

"Could it be…an object of worship?" Priestess leaned forward slightly, approaching the altar.

"You might best refrain from touching it carelessly."

"Yes, but… We can't *not* investigate it, can we?"

"We are short a scout or a thief in this party," Dwarf Shaman said.

Priestess reached out with one pale finger and gently touched the surface of the mirror.

Ploop. Her finger sank into it.

"…?!"

She instinctively pulled her hand back, and the surface of the mirror rippled like a pond. Tiny waves ran out from where she had touched it, rolling across the entire surface.

"Oh! Uh, this…"

"Get in formation," Goblin Slayer ordered, replacing Priestess near the mirror as she hurriedly drew back.

Each of the party members drew their weapons and readied for battle as the mirror kept shifting. The rippling surface twisted and turned crazily and, after a time, began to shine with a strange light.

They saw a wilderness, they knew not where; it was covered in peculiar green sand. A sun glinted in the disturbingly dead twilight sky.

But what drew their attention most of all was a massive, bizarre mechanical device. Small human silhouettes struggled to push it along; as it moved, it wobbled slowly, like a round mortar in a track.

No—they weren't humans. Goblin Slayer knew what they were.

"…Goblins."

It was a gang of cruel-faced imps. Another goblin with a whip in his hand and his mouth open wide—shouting in rage, no doubt—tried to hurry their labor. What were they doing and to what purpose? It was fearful even to imagine.

For the machine and its huge gears were unmistakably made of human bones.

"What in the world…?"

"The home of the goblins, I suppose."

Beside a shuddering Priestess, Lizard Priest nodded slowly. He came forward at a leisurely pace and touched the mirror again with the claw of one scaled hand…

Suddenly, the image in the mirror twisted.

It folded in on itself, ran to one side, spun, and began to dissipate as though it had been caught up in a sandstorm.

"Oh…!"

High Elf Archer exclaimed at the scene barely visible in the swirling picture. Her long ears flicked, and she pointed with her gorgeous hand and cried, "Look at that!" Everyone looked. "Just now I saw—I saw the ruins in that jungle! Where we were the other day!"

"In the jungle?" Goblin Slayer muttered. "The one with the unusually well-equipped goblins?"

"Is that all you remember about it? But yes. That's the one." High Elf Archer nodded at Goblin Slayer, her ears fluttering with excitement. "What do you think the chances are that the ones there were sent from here?"

"You think this is an ancient relic that can produce a Gate?" Dwarf Shaman whispered, as if he couldn't quite believe it.

He had good reason not to. Gate, a spell that could link two places, had been lost long ago.

Scrolls like the one Goblin Slayer had used were about the only places one encountered the spell anymore. And even those were expensive items that had to be fished out of old ruins first.

The idea of a magical item that could invoke that elusive spell at any time was boggling. The adventurers, of course, didn't know exactly how to use it, but if they could figure it out…

Just imagine the price it would bring. More than they could count.

"So somebody was summoning goblins with this thing—"

High Elf Archer backed slowly away from the mirror as if it might attack her.

"—gave them weapons and made them live down here—"

Dwarf Shaman picked up the thought, closing one eye and grimacing at the looking glass.

"—and then that foul beast was guarding it."

Lizard Priest finished with a slap of his tail.

"What do we do, Goblin Slayer, sir…?"

Priestess looked at him in distress.

Goblin Slayer didn't answer.

"No…" He slowly shook his head side to side, then walked off with a bold, decisive stride.

He rolled the corpse of the Giant Eye over with his foot, pulling out a sodden cloth that could just be seen beneath it.

It had probably been carried there by the blast. It was singed, covered in soot, and filthy, but when he uncrumpled it, a hideous war banner was revealed. It bore a crude drawing in the blackish-red pigment of dried blood.

A single eye.

The picture was childish, but what it signified was frighteningly clear.

The crest meant that they would have retribution for the stolen eye. It was the goblins' symbol, proof that the adventurers had found their citadel.

"I knew it was goblins," Goblin Slayer muttered.

As if in response, howling voices came from the depths of the earth.

Voices of immense hatred. Voices of jealousy and lust. Voices that sought to steal, to rape, to kill. Cruel shouts rife with greed.

From the farthest reaches of that dirty hole, the noises came up out of a darkness that seemed the province of nightmares.

"…Ee…"

Priestess squeezed her staff with both hands and trembled. She knew those sounds, knew them in a way that sickened her. Those voices—those goblins—!

"Ah-ha… Our blast will have echoed down to them." Lizard Priest sucked in a sharp breath, craning his neck.

The voices seemed to come from everywhere at once, from each of a number of corridors that led out of the chapel. Footsteps and echoes from the clanking of weapons and equipment played over one another, coming closer.

They didn't have much time.

"If this is where the little devils are coming from, then we cannot ignore it."

"So, you're sayin'…"

Dwarf Shaman pulled out his bottle of fire wine and took a great swig.

His face stiffened and turned slightly red, then burst into a strange smile as if to ward off his dismay.

"…they're comin' to take this place back?"

"Hey… Oh, man… Can't we catch a break?" High Elf Archer sat down weakly. Her ears drooped pitifully, all her energy of moments ago gone. Her delicate face fell, and it looked as if she might cry.

Priestess came up next to her, wearing much the same expression. With fearful, trembling, stiff hands, she gripped her sounding staff so tightly her skin began to turn white, and her eyes were quavering.

But she looked at Goblin Slayer, though not beseechingly nor in desperation. She only gazed directly at him.

"Goblin Slayer, sir."

Her slight whisper caused all of them to focus on him. Just as they had with the ogre, just as they had with the goblin lord, so they did now. In their most dire moments, this was the man who would manage something. It might have looked like they were giving up, but they weren't—not quite.

For if they did, who would turn to Goblin Slayer as a leader?

In the broadest terms, it was a sort of trust.

"……"

Goblin Slayer silently scanned the entire room.

The crumbling chapel. The mirror containing the awesome power of Gate. The goblins closing in from every direction. The four exhausted adventurers.

They had been backed completely into a corner—or had they?

“What have I got in my pocket…?”

He wasn’t looking for an answer, only talking to himself. It was a riddle he had never understood. Even now, he wasn’t sure he grasped it.

There was nothing there—except his hand.

A hand that might hold nothing. Or everything.

Didn’t it always?

And if it did, then…

“…”

He looked at High Elf Archer, who made no move to flee despite her evident fear.

At Dwarf Shaman, fortifying his courage with wine.

At Lizard Priest, who was spoiling for the coming battle.

And Priestess, who was looking squarely at him.

Then he nodded, and said quietly:

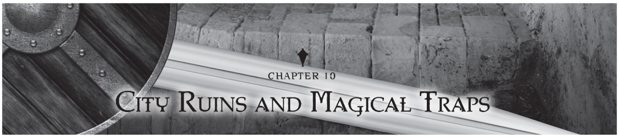
“Don’t worry.”

It was impossible to make out his expression behind that steel helm.

But to Priestess—no, to all of these, his only companions in the world—

“It won’t be a problem.”

—it seemed that, ever so softly, he was laughing.



CHAPTER 10

City Ruins and Magical Traps

If Death has footsteps, this must be the sound.

Battle drums rumbled from the depths of hell. Weapons and armor rattled on the advancing monsters, and their reeking breath profaned the air of the ruins; their spittle slickened the stone floors.

They were full of disorderly murmuring and growling. Every sound was rich with greed and overweening rage. They debated how best to tear apart the impertinent adventurers, how to dance on their broken bodies, to debase them.

Whumph. At the head of their group came the footsteps of that mammoth goblin, the champion.

First, he would take an eye for an eye—from each of them. That was where it would start, before any murder, any devouring, any debasing…

“Ohh…”

High Elf Archer’s sensitive ears picked up all of this easily. Her voice slipped out as she trembled, and the blood drained from her face.

She tightened the spider-silk string on her bow with a *twang*, checked her supply of arrows, and took a deep breath.

“Can you do it?”

“…Of course!”

At Goblin Slayer’s question, dispassionate as always, she answered stoutly.

She would feign pleasantness as much as she could. The more awful things got, the more she talked. If she couldn’t joke, she would surely die.

“Just try to avoid getting us almost blown up this time.”

“That is my intention.”

She narrowed her eyes, but he only nodded, taciturn as ever.

He had lit four torches and set one at each point of the compass; now he was examining the sanctuary by their light. In addition to the way they had come into the room, several other corridors led to who knew where.

“Can you tell where they’re coming from?”

“Everywhere,” High Elf Archer said with a shrug. “Don’t ask how many.”

“Milord Goblin Slayer, I have prepared a barrier.”

The other adventurers, of course, had not been idle.

Lizard Priest had piled up pieces of debris from the explosion around the altar. An entrenchment, even a simple one, often made the difference between victory and defeat in a defensive battle. The enemy would be vulnerable while trying to get past it, and it would slow them down, as well.

Dwarf Shaman, who had been directing the effort, wiped the dust from his hands and said, “Best we could do on short notice, but don’t expect much from it.”

“It will do. What about you?”

“Yes, sir, I’m ready!” Priestess answered bravely.

She had scrambled up on top of the altar with her small frame. It was her job to collect slinging stones, arrows, and usable short swords from the ground nearby. It was important that a new weapon be near to be handed over anytime they might need one.

“All right.” Goblin Slayer nodded.

He, too, could now hear the goblin army clearly.

There was to be no more waiting. No time for lengthy explanations. Goblin Slayer did not flinch.

“How many spells do you have left?”

“I have, um…” Priestess put a finger to her lips and thought.

How many more times could her soul endure supplicating to the gods above?

Experience suggested to her…

“I failed once and succeeded once, so…one more.”

“Save it,” Goblin Slayer said shortly. “We’ll need it later.”

“Yes, sir!”

Those were his instructions, and Priestess nodded unhesitatingly. She gripped her staff firmly in both hands, and from atop the altar, she peered into the darkness. If she was not going to be using her miracle, she would be responsible for keeping track of the big picture.

It was a great deal to bear alone—but she was not alone. They were all together.

"I'll do my best…!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! My, our humble temple maiden has grown quite valiant."

Beside the altar, Lizard Priest swished his tail and touched his tongue jovially to his nose.

"Wh-who, me?"

He turned toward Priestess, who seemed a bit embarrassed, holding his catalyst, a fang.

"Two remain for me. Though if I refrain from summoning a Dragontooth Warrior now, it will be three. I don't suppose I should wait?" Lizard Priest gave his peculiarly intense smile, baring his teeth.

"Do it," Goblin Slayer responded immediately. "Have it hold a shield." He jerked his chin in the direction of Priestess. "I want it to protect her."

"Very well, very well. And shall I attend to the mirror?"

"Yes."

Lizard Priest responded with a slow shake of his head from side to side and joined his hands in a strange gesture. He ascended the altar, then quickly pitched his fang onto the floor and focused his concentration.

It was said there was no tribe in this world more accomplished in battle than the lizardmen. Thoughtful as he was, the priest probably already had an inkling of what Goblin Slayer had in mind.

"O horns and claws of our father, Iguanodon, thy four limbs, become two legs to walk upon the earth."

Dwarf Shaman glanced at the praying Lizard Priest and the warrior he created, running a finger along his beard.

"I set up that Spirit Wall earlier and used Stupor… I'd say two more."

"Hold on to them. They'll be our trump cards."

"Oh-ho! Quite the important role I get. Until we need them, then, shall I help you, Beard-cutter?"

Dwarf Shaman gave a slap of his belly, already in his usual spirits. Without him, the party might have found it much harder to turn their mood around. High Elf Archer's giggle was like a bell.

"We're really blessed, aren't we? To have three spell casters."

"What's this? Didn't realize you knew how to be polite, long-ears."

"Oh, please! I'm always polite."

Someone laughed. Then all of them. They nodded to one another. That was enough.

They could see the goblins' glittering eyes now and hear the howling voice of the champion.

High Elf Archer closed one eye, her ears fluttering as she judged the distance to the enemy.

"…And? What do you want me to do?"

"Distract them, then kill them. Reduce their numbers, draw off as many as possible."

"Why do I get the feeling this is completely crazy?"

"Do you?"

Goblin Slayer took a sling in his free right hand and set a stone in it. At the same time, he passed another sling from his bag to Dwarf Shaman, intent on preparing the next barrage.

High Elf Archer gave a "hmph," set an arrow against her bowstring, and pulled it back.

"Ready? Here I go."

She let out a stiff but somehow lovely laugh. But at the same moment—

"GOROORORRRRRB!!"

It was the war cry of the goblin champion.

The one-eyed monster shook his staff and roared, trying to rile up the goblins under his command.

His troops carried spears and clubs and axes and rusty daggers.

Even as the mob shuffled forward, one of the creatures in front —

"One."

"GROB?!"

—fell victim to an unerring stone from Goblin Slayer's sling.

Throughout the history of this world, humans had always been most suited to throwing things. Not even a dragon could toss an object farther than a human.

Goblins lacked the strength, elves loved their bows too much, and dwarves and rheas found throwing a simple pastime. Humans alone could launch a stone faster than a speeding horse straight at their target.

"GOROB?!"

"GROOORRB?!"

And as long as there were stones on the ground, a sling would never run out of ammunition.

"Ho! You barely have to aim around here! I like it!"

Dwarf Shaman's fat fingers flashed like magic, loading one rock after another into his sling and flinging them at the goblins.

"Fire away, Beard-cutter! No bad shots here!"

"That is my plan… That makes three."

A stone whistled through the air, cracking open another goblin skull. Two in a row, three. Goblin Slayer might as well have been shooting goblins in a barrel.

The little monsters trod over the corpses of their fallen, stone-crowned brothers.

"GROB! GOOOROBB!!"

The goblins never thought for a second that they were attacking the adventurers.

It was they who were under attack. Goblins saw themselves as the victims in all things, and so it was everyone else's fault if the goblins fought back. The deaths of their comrades only stoked a vengeful anger in them. What was a little wall of debris?

Their beady eyes fixed on the one the adventurers were defending, the girl atop the altar…

"Incoming, right side!"

"Got it!"

The girls' voices cried past each other, and an instant later, the encroaching goblins were full of arrows.

Priestess looked around, sweat beading up on her forehead, and wherever she indicated, High Elf Archer would fire in that direction.

Bounce, bounce. Each flick of her ears was accompanied by a deadly shaft that rode along the underground wind.

No goblin could escape her.

"Sure are a lot of them, though…!"

"Three on the left! Four in front!"

"Yeah, I'm on it."

High Elf Archer danced from one side of the altar to the other, loosing her arrows as fast as she could load them.

It wasn't fatigue that caused her to sweat; it was nervousness and tension. She had long since tired of firing one arrow at once; now she grabbed anything nearby, three bolts at a time. Of course, her quiver was empty; she was supplying herself with whatever could be found on the floor.

And so long as that supply remained, the goblins would not get near her, but only add to the growing pile of corpses.

“GORORORОВ! GROB! GOORB!”

So this was no time to be grumbling about the situation.

The goblin champion gave an order and took the lid off a jar carefully cradled in the arms of one of his lackeys.

The goblins with their wicked little minds had invented a sticky, poisonous liquid.

The archers in the goblin ranks carried crude bows and dipped the stone tips of their arrows in the poison before they fired.

“GOORB?!”

They had, however, a habit of shooting entirely from the hip, resulting in several goblins sustaining poisoned arrows to the back.

Even when the injuries were not critical, the victims would thrash and froth at the mouth and finally die.

What mattered, though, was that some reach the elf in the back row who was shooting at them and the human girl giving directions.

If they could only hit those two targets, the poison would do the rest. If it only paralyzed them, that would be fine. Or they might die. The goblins would enjoy it either way.

“————————”

But one could not forget about the loyal Dragontooth Warrior. The skeletal soldier held up the shield it had been given, silently deflecting the arrows that flew at the young women. Now and then, an arrow struck it, but without flesh and blood the poison was no threat.

“Huh.” High Elf Archer wiped the sweat from her brow and grabbed an arrow at her feet, then gave the warrior a pat on the back. “This thing’s pretty cute.”

“Y-you think so?” Priestess frowned and ducked to avoid an arrow. She held desperately on to her cap, trying to control her breathing. She wiped some sweat before it ran into her eyes, then peered into the darkness.

Next to her, Lizard Priest had positioned his great body imposingly in front of the mirror.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Delighted as I am to receive your most welcome praise…”

The sacred mirror had been set in the stone wall with some ancient technique. Lizard Priest scratched one sharp claw along the worked frame that surrounded the rippling surface.

"…I must say I am most perplexed how this mirror is attached here!"

He gave a hissing breath, and the scales on his arms bulged as his muscles strained.

"O proud and strange brontosaurus, grant me the strength of ten thousand!"

It was the miracle of Partial Dragon, which invoked the blessing of his great ancestor spirit, the fearsome naga.

His enlarged muscles now boasted the strength of the terrible lizard that had walked the land so long ago. Now his claw cracked the stone, the rift widening without harming the mirror.

But this would require more than a scratch. There was no time.

"GOROOOOBB! GOOROOROB!!"

The distant barrier was breached in a single blow, the debris returning to dust. With a crashing step forward, the one-eyed goblin champion raised his club high and began his assault.

"GORRB!"

"GORB! GOORB!!"

The shrieks of the goblins made their pleasure plain.

They had a hero with them, a champion, and that gave them the faith that they could prevail. In that respect, they were no different from people.

Priestess shivered as their hideous voices rang in her ears. She bit her lip, gripped her staff, and said as loudly as she could:

"The big one, he's coming…!"

"I'll handle him." Goblin Slayer didn't hesitate. In the next instant, he snatched a dagger from the floor and put one hand down, leaping over the barrier.

"Stay by the altar!"

"Yes, indeed!" Dwarf Shaman said, catching the sling Goblin Slayer tossed to him and lobbing a stone.

With Dwarf Shaman's support, Goblin Slayer flew like an arrow at—and then through—his enemies.

Three goblins stood before him, weapons in hand. But what of them?

"Eighteen, nineteen…twenty!"

"GROOB?!"

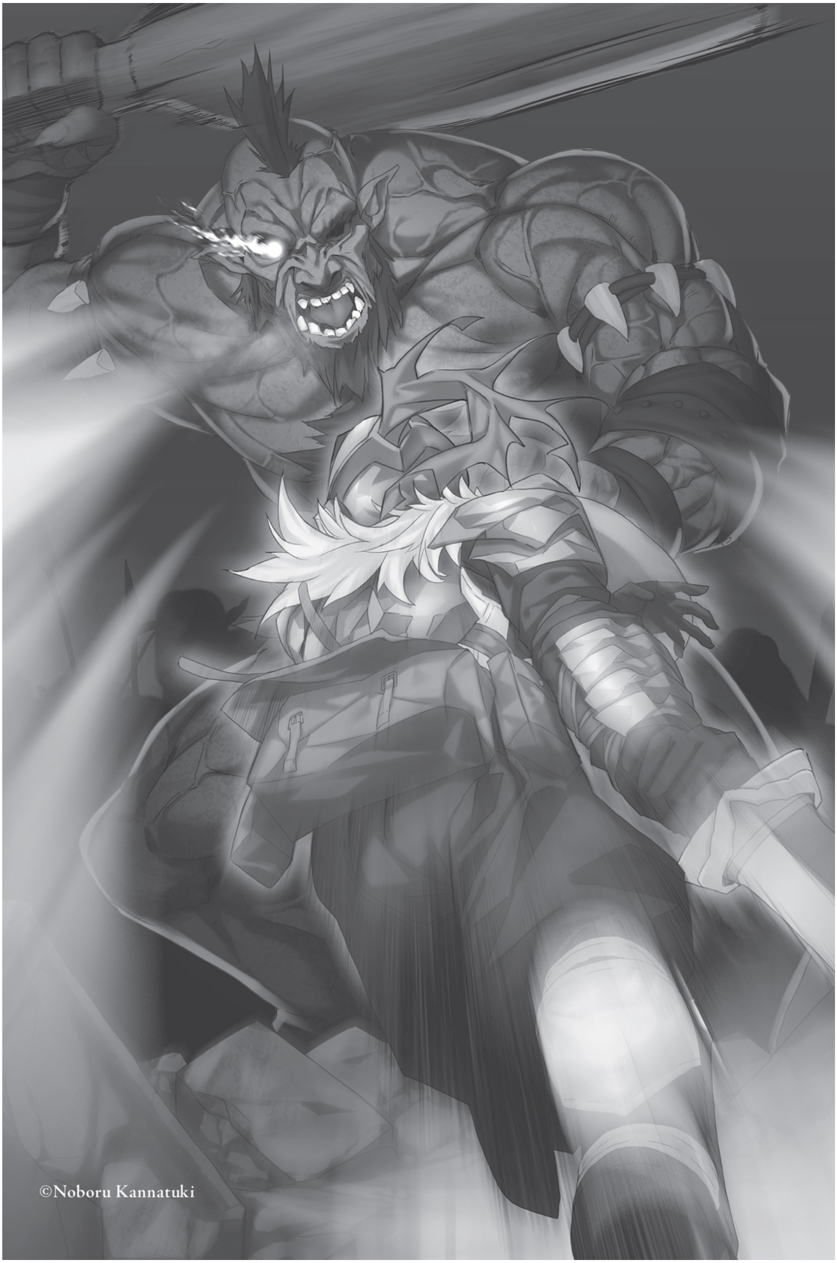
With the sword in his right hand, he delivered a critical hit, rending the throat of the goblin that stood just in front of him.

The creature frothed blood; Goblin Slayer kicked him away, freeing his sword, which he then used to crack the skull of the creature coming in from his right.

The monster on his left he could not deal with himself, so he used his shield to shove it around behind him. No sooner had he done so than one of Dwarf Shaman's stones came flying.

"GOR?!"

The goblin stumbled as the stone struck him square in the chest, and Goblin Slayer stabbed him dead without a second thought. He caught the monster in the throat; the goblin fell to the ground without so much as a twitch. Goblin Slayer let go of his sword and allowed it to fall with the body.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“GOROOB!!”

“Twenty-one…!”

He flung the dagger at his waist to protect his rear. It struck home in the throat of a goblin that had been making to charge him. As the creature clawed at the air, Goblin Slayer jumped over to him and grabbed his weapon.

A club. Probably the first weapon humans had ever wielded. Not bad.

“Twenty-two…three.”

A blow from the blunt instrument pulverized another goblin skull, then Goblin Slayer fixed on an archer in the rear and sent the club flying toward him.

“GORARA?!”

It wasn’t enough for a critical hit, of course. It was a shot from High Elf Archer that finished off the goblin bowman.

“Got him!” High Elf Archer exclaimed. Goblin Slayer didn’t have to look at her to know her ears were bouncing up and down. “Orcbolg, arrows!”

“Hmm…!”

Even if the party was not exactly psychic, they were never out of step.

Goblin Slayer kicked goblins out of the way as he ran across the battlefield to grab an enemy archer’s quiver. Then he spun, trusting to centrifugal force to carry the bundle to High Elf Archer.

But the load was heavy and he only had a second to spin, so it could hardly have reached her.

“On it!”

Dwarf Shaman jumped out to collect the quiver, tossing it to the rear.

“Done!” he shouted.

“…Eep!”

Priestess caught the quiver in her arms and passed it on to High Elf Archer, returning the elf to her element.

A hail of arrows ensued. The firepower of an elf with a good bow and arrows wants nothing compared to a spell caster. As she often said, a sufficiently developed technology (aided by skill) was indistinguishable from magic.

There were certain fools, though, who—as Dwarf Shaman might have put it—felt that "spell casters just throw lightning bolts."

"GROORB!!"

Several goblins were looking to make Dwarf Shaman their punching bag, now that he had come out from behind the barrier.

"How's it going, Scaly? Not done yet?"

They were too close for ranged attacks. Dwarf Shaman tossed aside his sling and drew his ax.

Dwarves were built as tough as the rocks, after all. Swinging his stubby arms and legs wildly, Dwarf Shaman all but rolled into the enemy formation, striking and kicking out this way and that.

"Just…a bit…long…er!"

The altar Lizard Priest had braced himself against began to crack under the claws of his feet, some debris crumbling away.

Lizardmen don't sweat, but a human in his position would have been soaked.

The mirror was slowly pulling away from the wall with an audible sound, but clearly Lizard Priest would need more time.

"…! I'll help…!"

"My…thanks!"

Priestess took a quick look around, then came over and knelt near Lizard Priest.

They were completely outnumbered.

Numbers are goblins' greatest strength and adventurers' greatest weakness.

The monsters pushed slowly closer to the altar, the size of the horde only growing. Priestess had decided that time was more precious than a bird's-eye view of the battle. But was there anything her willowy arms could do? There had to be.

In one quick motion she jammed her sounding staff in between the mirror and the wall and began to use it as a lever.

"Hr…aahh…"

"…Still need more time, do they?" Goblin Slayer muttered, having entrusted things to his comrades.

He and he alone was the frontline defense now.

As a mob of goblins collapsed around him, Goblin Slayer took a sword from one of them. It was a stick mounted with a stone blade; it could barely be called a sword.

But Goblin Slayer had never been picky about his weapons.

"GORARAB…!"

"Hmph."

Then, a massive form loomed up before him—the one-eyed goblin champion.

The hideous empty socket. The one forbidding eye that burned like a will-o'-the-wisp. His awful smile. His rage.

"GORARARABOOBOBORIIIIN!!"

The next moment, Goblin Slayer jumped backward almost as if he were falling.

"GORAB?!"

He ignored the shout of the goblin he'd taken with him, catching himself and rolling back up to one knee.

From there, he watched as the floundering goblin took the devastating blow from the champion's club.

"GORARARAB!!"

The roaring goblin champion was focused entirely on Goblin Slayer. Its club cracked the stone floor, raising a cloud of dust and a great noise.

"Too strong for your own good," Goblin Slayer spat, and it was only instants before the next blow came.

The champion's strength was not less even than the ogre (not that Goblin Slayer remembered that word) they had faced before.

Goblin Slayer wanted to avoid both critical hits and fumbles. He kept his shield raised, shoving through the crowd of goblins.

"GORAB?!"

Screams and cries mingled with the sounds of rending flesh and breaking bone; filthy geysers of blood spewed everywhere.

All caused by the goblin champion and his club.

He swung the weapon this way and that, determined to smash Goblin Slayer, but catching only his own allies. The unlucky monsters became Goblin Slayer's shield, sadly giving their lives in the process.

"Idiot."

"GORAB?!"

Goblin Slayer buried his sword in the cranium of a cowering creature, letting go of the hilt to trade his weapon for the monster's.

It was a rusty blade that had probably been stolen from an adventurer; now, many days later, it had been returned to one.

Goblin Slayer sliced through the throat of a nearby goblin, almost as if to test the blade, provoking a spray of blood. The creature gagged like it was drowning. With his victim still skewered on its own weapon, Goblin Slayer spun and kicked it backward.

“GOORORORB!!”

The goblin champion put an end to its subordinate with a *smash*. It was probably a better death than choking on its own blood.

“A goblin should be so lucky to have such an end.”

“GORARARAB!! GORARARA!!”

Strike—a goblin broken. Dust rained from the ceiling.

Strike—a goblin thrown into the air. Dust from the ceiling.

Strike. Strike. Strike. Each time, Goblin Slayer slipped away.

Self-reflection was not in the goblin vocabulary.

Yes, the champion kept killing his own troops, but that was their own fault, or at least that of the human using them as a shield.

What an awful human! It would not be enough to tear out his eye, nor to shatter his limbs, nor even to kill his friends as he watched!

The enraged champion conveniently forgot that he had been known to use his allies as shields himself. He was frustrated that the adventurer would not stand and fight, glossing over the goblins’ own use of poison gas.

Goblins are stupid, Goblin Slayer repeated to himself, *but they’re not foolish.*

In other words, they weren’t foolish, but they weren’t thoughtful. And a thoughtless person waving a sword around is easy to take advantage of.

After all, they would be failing to use their greatest weapon.

So Goblin Slayer drove straight across the battlefield, the champion following behind him.

“If Orcbolg is drawing it away…!”

High Elf Archer was not just standing by and watching.

She climbed onto the altar, kicking her way there through goblins with her long, beautiful legs. She gave a click of her tongue.

How she *hated* to use goblin arrows.

“Geez, I can’t believe this!” she said, half in anger. Her ears twitched as she read the wind and sent her arrows flying.

She was not, of course, aiming for the champion, but for the goblin rabble.

“GROB?! GOORB?!”

Even a crude arrow can pierce a body, take a life. Goblins fell like rain in a storm, but their numbers were immense.

Dwarf Shaman buried his ax in the head of another one, his beloved beard covered in spatters of blood.

“Ho, long-ears! Can’t y’shoot any more than that?”

“Quiet, dwarf! You want results, get me better arrows!”

“Can I interest you in some nice rocks?”

“Forget it!”

And on they argued. Was this their usual banter, or were they doing it on purpose? When they could no longer take verbal jabs at each other, then that would truly be the end. So it was with most adventurers.

Even Priestess, her face bright red as she strained against her staff.

“Hn… Hnnnn…!”

Her arms quavered and she bit her lip as she threw all her body weight into her battle with the mirror. It was all the little human girl with her delicate frame could do.

The dauntless lizardman, for his part, spared not an ounce of strength in his gallant endeavor.

“Come…on…just one more…push…!”

Still imbued with the blessing of his ancestor, the fearsome naga, his efforts were at a fever pitch. Breath hissing between his bared fangs, every inch of him from his claws to his tail had become power itself.

Screeeeeeeyyyeeeechhh!

With a tremendous noise, the sacred mirror finally succumbed to sheer strength.

The great thing rested in Lizard Priest’s hands, along with a chunk of the wall.

“Goblin…Slayer…sir!”

Priestess called out to him. Her breath came in ragged gasps; her voice was weak and exhausted.

Goblin Slayer glanced back, gave the onrushing champion a kick, and dashed off.

“Set down the mirror faceup! Then get under it!”

“Understood!”

With a grunt, Lizard Priest slid the mirror over the top of the altar like a roof. He knew everything hinged on this moment.

He got on one knee and braced his shoulder against the mirror, without so much as a tremble.

“He comes!”

Supporting the other side was the loyal Dragontooth Warrior.

"ORARARAG!!"

The goblin champion gave a single mighty blow.

Though the goblins could not be expected to understand exactly what was going on, it was clear that *something* was happening.

The champion's club connected with several goblins, who didn't have so much as a second to dodge, splattering their brains around the room.

Jumping backward, Goblin Slayer lashed out with a hand spear he had taken from a foe. The blade sent several of the champion's fingers spinning into the air, prompting a resounding roar.

"GARAOR?!"

"Stone Blast! A big one, upward!"

"Upward?!—On it!"

There was an instant of surprise on Dwarf Shaman's part, but he knew better than to hesitate.

He grabbed a handful of clay from his bag. Breathing on it as he rolled it together, he gave a shout.

"Come out, you gnomes, it's time to work, now don't you dare your duty shirk—a bit of dust may cause no shock, but a thousand make a lovely rock!"

He flung the ball of dirt into the air as hard as he could, and it became a massive boulder before their very eyes…

"Light!"

"Right!"

Not distracted for a moment by the sight, Priestess responded immediately—to his words, to his trust.

She knew this was the reason she was here, and it made her so proud she thought her small chest might burst.

She poured her all into the prayer that connected her soul to the gods in heaven.

"O Earth Mother, abounding in mercy, grant your sacred light to we who are lost in darkness…!"

It was a pure prayer, offered up by a frail damsel at the cost of the energy of her own soul.

How could the all-compassionate Earth Mother do otherwise than to grant Holy Light?

"GORORB?!"

An explosion of sun!

From Priestess's staff (fresh from its turn as a lever), a searing light filled the space. It was probably more light than the insides of these ruins had seen in all their eons of existence.

The goblins shrieked as if they had been burned, clutching their faces and stumbling backward. Their retinas *had* been burned. And Goblin Slayer, though he had covered his face immediately, had suffered the same.

"...Hr..."

"Orcbolg, this way!"

But nonetheless, he could hear a clear voice despite the white darkness.

High Elf Archer—she who possessed skills beyond those of any ranger—reached out for his hand.

"Sorry."

"Never mind! Not that I have any idea what you're thinking."

With her guidance, he took the last one, two, three steps.

She jumped gracefully, and Goblin Slayer scrambled up onto the altar.

Lizard Priest's tail reached out, pulling Goblin Slayer safely under the mirror.

Goblin Slayer shouted, "Falling Control—bring it down!"

"Hrrf, 'course! *Come out, you gnomes, and let it go! Here it comes, look out below! Turn those buckets upside down—empty all upon the ground!*"

"...That makes...," Goblin Slayer muttered. He turned around, supported by Lizard Priest's tail.

With his right hand, he took firm hold of Priestess. Her hand was trembling gently.

High Elf Archer still gripped his left hand, hard enough to hurt through his leather gauntlet.

Dwarf Shaman gave him a hearty slap on the back. Even now, with his spirit drained, he was as jolly as ever.

Goblin Slayer took in the sight of the goblins through his light-scorched eyes. They shouted in confusion, fear, pain, greed, and hatred; they floundered uselessly.

"GO?! GROB?!"

"GRAROORORORORB?!"

No sooner had Dwarf Shaman completed his complicated invocations than the boulder slammed into the ceiling.

The ceiling that had been rattled by the explosion, struck by the eyeball monster, and shaken by the goblin champion's roar.

The ceiling whose stones had been held up for countless ages by tree roots.

But none could best time.

And here, time had a little help from mass and weight and the power of the spirits.

The gnomes, rulers of earth, directed all their power directly downward.

First, a little fracture ran along the ceiling. Then, it cracked, and then a bit of it, too heavy for the roots to support, gave way.

And then…

"…Fifty, and…three."

An instant later, the howling face of the goblin champion was buried beneath an avalanche of dirt and vanished.

That was the end.

§

It was not long before it all seemed over, like everything had died.

This place where a fine brown dust rose into the air—had it really been a chapel just moments earlier?

Now, any sign of what it had been was covered in dirt and rubble and rocks and debris. Where the ceiling should have been, there was only a nest of twisting roots. Faint sunlight—or, now, the light of the moon and stars—filtered through them.

It was nighttime, early summer. The stars that shimmered above were said to be the eyes of the gods watching from the high heavens. They watched over this place, but now there was nothing that testified to its former inhabitants.

Except perhaps—just perhaps—the terrible goblin bodies that could be glimpsed amid the debris.

…No.

There was the mirror.

In the middle of the devastated shrine was a mountain of rubble where an altar might once have been. At its peak sat a huge mirror, reflecting the light of the stars back into the sky.

Then, there was a crash.

"Pfah!"

A sweet voice sounded, and the mountain of rubble crumbled ever so slightly.

A rock was shoved aside, and making a narrow tunnel through the dirt came…an elf girl.

It was High Elf Archer, her face grimy with dust.

"G-good gods, Orc—Orcbolg! What were you *thinking*?!"

She squirmed like a cat that had fallen in water, her ears laid back. A thin layer of dust seemed to be the worst she'd come off with. Priestess, who crawled out after her, gave a soft sigh. She coughed several times, spitting dirt out of her mouth.

"Th-that was surprising…"

"*Surprising?* That's what you call it?"

"I guess I'm kind of…used to it by now."

"Oh, for—!"

High Elf Archer reached out to help Priestess up, still fuming.

Lizard Priest's eyes rolled in his head at the scene as he crawled out; then, he sat down heavily. "Heavens above… Such is our good luck to have a Gate mirror at the right moment."

As he heaved a sigh, the Dragontooth Warrior next to him shook its head, too, in a clever touch of artistry.

The altar still stood. That was why they were all still alive… But there was one strange thing.

Dirt and dust were piled all around them, but the altar in the center of it all was clear.

The reason was the mirror, which the Dragontooth Warrior was now supporting by itself. Held up by the warrior and Lizard Priest, it had transported the falling debris through its Gate. If it hadn't, the adventurers would have been as dead as the goblins all around them.

"It absorbed all the rubble. It's only a shame it's so heavy," Lizard Priest said.

"Well, you did most of the work, Scaly." Dwarf Shaman clambered out next and thumped down next to Lizard Priest with a cackle. "Guess it's a bit big for a shield, isn't it!"

He could finally drink without interruption. He lost no time in pulling out his wineskin and taking a swig. His cheeks were pale from the drain his spells had put on his spirit, but quaffing some alcoholic spirits quickly restored a healthy flush.

"Got to say, though, I feel a wee bit bad for the ones on the *other* side."

Only the ancients knew exactly how to use this equally ancient artifact. It was impossible to say who had brought the thing here, but surely this was a misuse of the Gate.

The mirror connected a goblin nest with the underground of the water town—why did it lead to those ruins?

“Maybe this is how people got around back then. Eh, Beard-cutter?”

“Not interested.”

There was Goblin Slayer.

The last to emerge from the mountain of rubble, he showed no sign of fatigue, speaking calmly and dispassionately. He was covered in dust and spatters of blood, but his cheap-looking steel helmet and grimy leather armor were just the same as always.

Priestess, who had finally gotten to her feet with the aid of her staff, pursed her lips at the sight of him.

“We are *very* lucky we weren’t underneath the town.”

“If we had been, I would have thought of something else.”

She puffed out her cheeks with a groan. He was, of course, unmoved.

Goblin Slayer’s steel helmet turned this way and that, surveying the area.

He took in Priestess’s look of exasperation, the jovial-looking Lizard Priest, and Dwarf Shaman, who glowed redder and redder as he drank.

And finally, he came to High Elf Archer, who was glaring daggers—or perhaps arrows—at him through slitted eyes.

“Hey,” he said.

“…What?”

“No fire, no water, no poison, no explosion.”

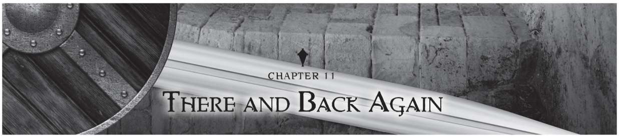
He sounded a touch impressed with himself.

In the moonlight, a smile came over High Elf Archer’s face. A smile as translucent and beautiful as if it were made of glass.

“Orcbolg?”

“What?”

“You’re an idiot.” And she gave him a kick that sent Goblin Slayer sprawling backward into the rubble.



CHAPTER 11

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

To her, that world seemed a pure white, a blank space utterly suffused by light.

The warm air, the refreshing breeze, the rustling of leaves, the grass against her bare skin. All of it.

All of it was revitalizing, full of light, leaving no place for chaos. She walked through it all regally, feeling a gentle ease in her heart.

Yes—she was at ease. That surprised her.

These past several days, she had felt an unwonted warmth in her heart. She could not fathom what it was, but she had an idea of where it had come from.

It had begun when she had slept with the injured man—or so she thought.

He was an average warrior of no special genius, whose body spoke of a singular devotion to training. All the more reason she treasured it more than that of any hero. She even saw the value of each of the scars in his skin and hers as she pressed against him.

Suddenly, she stopped.

Soft footsteps were making their way through the grass of the Temple garden.

Something black amid the white. A hazy, dark silhouette.

Her lips parted slightly, and a thin smile crept onto her face.

How could she forget that form?

"How good to see you well."

The silhouette—*he*—nodded briefly.

He was wearing leather armor and a steel helmet; at his hip was a sword that seemed a strange length. Many a time she had dreamed of him, a swimming darkness concealing his warrior's form.

"I've come with a question," he said and strode boldly up to her side.

She was briefly lost as to how to act. Should she remain aloof, or would an honest smile be better? To look too delighted would be childish and shameful.

"Yes, what is it? If it is within my power to answer…"

In the end, she chose her usual calm smile. To her, that seemed most like her. She hoped he would think so, too.

She wondered what expression he wore. The misty form she saw revealed nothing. Though even if she had been able to see, his helmet still would have hidden him from her.

And that was just a bit of a shame.

In a soft voice, he said:

"You knew everything, didn't you?"

She felt her heart skip a beat, her cheeks grow hot. She drew her sword-and-scales staff near to herself, then gave an invigorating stretch of her back.

How she hoped her voice would not tremble.

"…Yes. I did."

She could hear him breathe softly, "I see."

It was the same dispassionate tone he had used when they had first met and when they had spoke in bed.

She found that strangely, impossibly saddening.

Only now did she realize she had expected *something* to change. She had never had such an unsettling feeling before.

"But…how did you figure it out?"

"I didn't."

She gave him a curious cock of her head.

"I intended to ask that of everyone who was in a position to know."

"Everyone…," Sword Maiden murmured. "Heh. Is that so…?"

She found herself puffing out her cheeks at the touch of disappointment.

That's disgraceful. Don't be so childish, she chided herself.

"Perhaps I should have been less forthcoming, then…" She sighed lightly and looked at him—at his shadow. "Still…I'm not unhappy to be the first one you asked."

Her lips turned up slightly, forming a half circle. Did she do it? Or did it just happen? She herself wasn't sure.

"May I ask why you suspected?"

"A number of reasons."

The dark shadow shifted slightly in her vision. It had a bold, unconcerned gait. Yet it made no sound.

She loved the way he walked.

"That white… What was it called?"

"Alligator?"

"Yes." He nodded. "Something like that. I don't believe that was a random encounter."

"You think it was a planned encounter, then."

"At least to the extent that it tried to chase us away and unilaterally attacked the goblins."

"Do you know you sound just a tad paranoid?"

He shook his head in reply. "You have ruins like this and yet no maps and no rat-killing quests. Adventurers avoid the place. There aren't even any patrols. It's impossible."

"Aren't you knowledgeable."

"…Yes," Goblin Slayer said. "When it comes to adventurers, I am."

"Hee-hee." A giggle burbled up from the back of her throat at his blunt answer.

"In other words, there had to be something standing guard down there… A familiar."

"…"

She said nothing, only stared at him with the smile pasted on her face.

She hated to admit it—but it would be shameful to deny it, as well. He was right: The alligator was a guardian of order in the service of the Supreme God, the protector of the city's underground.

The chill of the rain, the heat of battle, the stench of goblins, the rusty blades piercing scale and skin.

She had entered the bath to ease the sensations she shared with the alligator.

The thought of the way she had exposed herself to the priestess there made her cheeks burn so brightly even she could feel them.

"Ironic, isn't it?" she whispered. "That the messenger of the Supreme God should protect the city and the city alone."

"Then you know." *The ones who killed the woman, spilled her innards, and left her corpse*— "They weren't goblins."

He was right again.

Goblins are cowardly, cruel, brutal, and not very smart. It would probably never occur to them to linger in human territory to vivisect and devour their prey.

Their unfortunate captives were always taken back to the nest, to be diligently stripped of their virtue there. Or, if the prisoners were numerous enough, the goblins might simply toy with them until they died.

Whatever the case, their death would not be easy.

She knew all of this.

"…No, they weren't."

The scene was burned into her memory—quite literally.

She had been shut up in a dark stone chamber, riddled with her own filth and that of her captors, crying piteously…

They had burned both of her eyes with a torch. That was more than ten years ago now.

"They were planning something with that mirror… The supporters of that infamous Demon God. The mastermind is—"

No longer in this world.

Somewhere altogether separate from them, everything was wrapping up.

She slumped against a pillar, turning her unseeing eyes to the landscape beyond.

"After all…"

The white world swam before her. She looked at that endless blank and sighed. It was the sort of thing a young village girl bored of talking might have done.

"After all, if goblins attacked, I'm sure I would just…break down weeping."

Sword Maiden was quite aware of the movements of the Evil Sect, against which she herself had once stood. When she had learned of the ghastly rituals of living sacrifice they were performing, she had a good idea of what they wanted to achieve.

Revenge on her. Most forms of such retaliation, she could have endured.

But *goblins*.

Her feet trembled. Clutching the sword and scales, she finally stood. She was glad her eyes were hidden by the bandage.

Who could she tell?

Who could she tell that the hero called Sword Maiden needed to be saved from simple goblins?

"Who would believe me?"

As she spoke, she pulled back the cloth of her vestments gracelessly and began to massage her own shoulders. Her lips curled teasingly, and she said in a smirking tone:

“What do you mean to do with me?”

“Nothing.” He sounded the same as ever: dutiful, even, mechanical, cold. “Because you’re not a goblin.”

She pursed her lips as if she were sulking—no, in fact, she *was* sulking.

“That’s why you don’t ask why, isn’t it?”

“If you want to talk, I will listen.”

“Oh-ho.” A languid breath slipped out of her. “I wanted someone to understand.”

A long gust of wind rustled branches and leaves and grass.

Fear, sorrow, pain, terror, helplessness—such things are in this world, and in this world are people who do what inspires such things.

“…I just wanted someone to understand.”

Goblins lived under the town.

They emerged from the sewers at night to attack people in the streets. Adventurers who were sent down after them didn’t return; there was no knowing who would become their victim and when. Goblins might be hiding under the bed, in the shadow of the door. If you fell asleep, they would attack you. She was sure everyone would feel that fear, just as she did.

“But in the end…no one did…”

In the end, no one lived in fear that goblins would kill them. It was always someone else who would die. Never them.

“…I can give you that Gate mirror.”

She put a fawning smile wide across her face. Even she knew it was all too obviously fake and fragile.

“Surely you understand… You of all people must…”

He interrupted her brusquely:

“I got rid of it.”

“What…?” For the first time, something other than a smile crossed her face. Surprise and a hint of confusion. “That was an ancient relic. A treasure worth thousands of gold pieces.”

“Other goblins might have learned how to use it.” He spoke coldly, bluntly, as if to emphasize his disinterest. “We encased the mirror in concrete and sent it to the bottom of the canal. It will make a good bed for your white—whatever it’s called.”

His silhouette did not waver an inch. He sounded as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

"Heh-heh. You are most…most interesting indeed."

The overwhelming ordinariness of his speech made her feel all the stranger. She felt like she was floating; there was an uncommon ease of heart.

"There can't be many like you."

"Perhaps."

"Say. May I ask you something?"

"I can't promise I'll know the answer," he murmured.

"Now that you've slain the goblins…has anything changed?" She spread her arms as she asked, like an innocent girl sharing a little secret.

Heroes—heroes were different.

When a hero put an end to the Evil Sect, justice and the world and peace and so on were all saved. But what of someone who helped a pitiful girl who was afraid of goblins? People would go on living quietly; the river would keep flowing. Nothing would change. Nothing.

That was why no one had helped her.

Even when a nameless priestess carelessly got herself captured by goblins and was debased. Even when the fifteen-year-old girl inside the woman acclaimed as Sword Maiden cried out for salvation.

Who would deign to notice such things?

Otherwise, how could she put out a goblin-slaying quest?

"Surely nothing…nothing changes."

"I don't care," he answered without a moment's hesitation. "You said you've been through terrible things, yes?"

She nodded yes.

"I have seen them. From start to finish. So I don't understand your feelings." Goblin Slayer was unequivocal.

"——————————"

Sword Maiden stood vacantly.

She reached out gently, beseechingly, to the hazy shadow that floated in her white world.

"…So, you will not help me?"

"No."

He did not take her hand, but curtly turned his back on her.

Her head hung as if she had been cast into the depths of hell, and she laughed mirthlessly. There was an element of resignation in it. A feeling she was all too familiar with.

This is how it always goes.

Her soul, once that of a maiden, had been wounded in every possible place.

Even now, that awful scene, her last sight in the world, was burned into her eyes. At night, it would come to torment her. The horde of goblins defiling her, raping her, violating her, taking everything from her.

And no one could save her from it. It would go on and on, forever…

No one would help her.

Ever. Not ever.

"But."

She looked up in surprise at the single echoing word.

"If goblins appear again, summon me."

The dark shadow, his back, was already far away. But his impassive, mechanical voice carried readily.

"I will kill them for you."

"Oh…"

She slid to her knees as if she were collapsing. Her exquisite features scrunched up and a sob escaped her mouth; she couldn't restrain the tears that poured from her eyes.

When was the last time she had cried harder than she did after one of her dreams?

"Even… Even in my…my dreams?"

"Yes."

"You…will… You will come…?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Her voice was shaking so badly she couldn't say the word; it rolled half formed out of her mouth.

But he answered her clearly:

"Because I am Goblin Slayer."

The one who kills the little devils.

The dark shadow called Goblin Slayer left her.

Gone to destroy goblins.

"Oh…"

Sword Maiden found herself clawing at her generous chest.

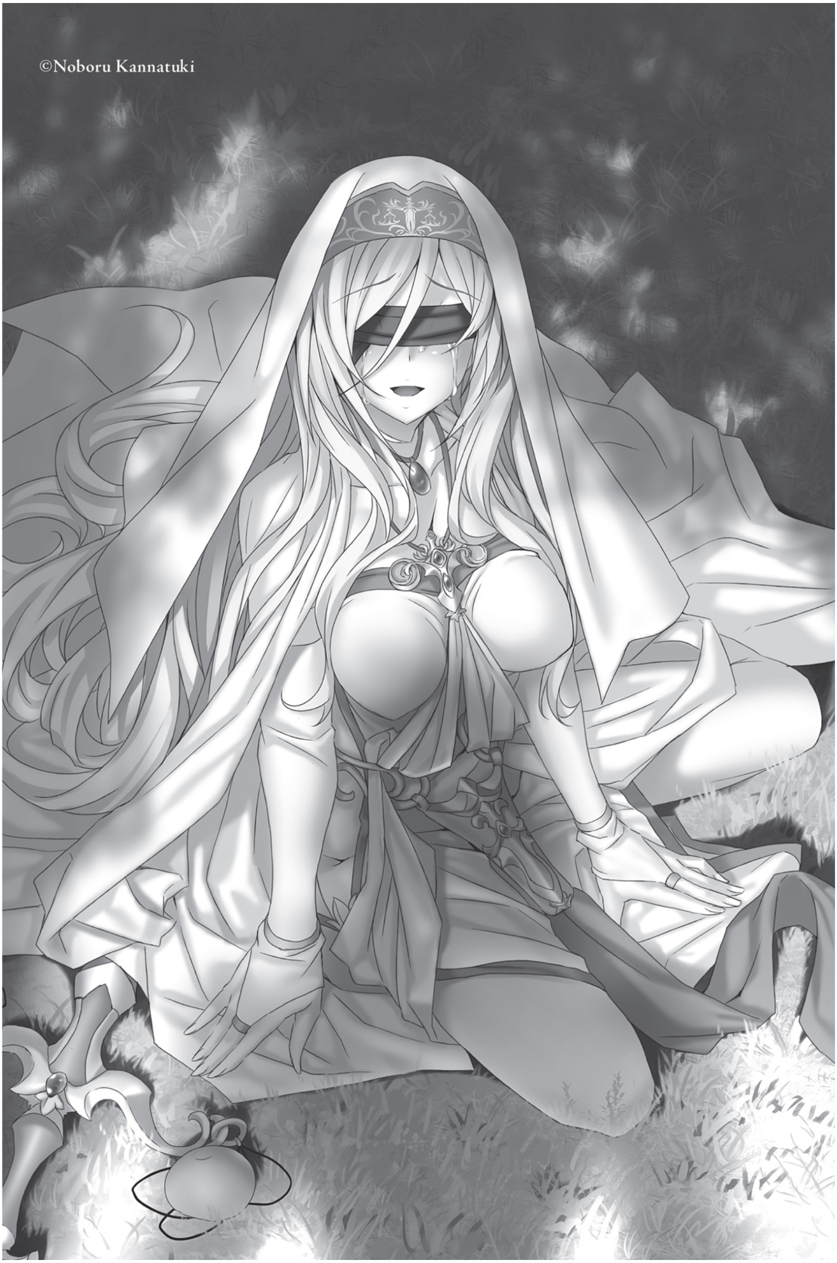
It was not pure or becoming.

But she had never imagined a day like this would come. She had never imagined that she would once again be able to feel these feelings. She had thought them forever beyond her grasp, but now she clung to them.

It was nothing.

A broken woman had talked to a broken man. Nothing more than that.

But now she knew the truth of the warmth that blossomed in her chest. It was a long-smoldering spark, unexpectedly fanned into a raging flame. Perhaps it could be compared to a hearth shared with another person: all things well, no cares, a peaceful sleep.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No anxiousness, no fear.

No quaking and weeping in the dark, no waking up from a nightmare screaming.

How she had yearned for an undisturbed night's sleep.

"I… I… I—"

She raised her voice, sniffling and sobbing.

With her hands, she wiped desperately at the tears that poured from her unseeing eyes.

As the piercing joy welled up in her heart, she shouted out:

"I cherish you…!"

Whether or not the words reached him, the gods only know.

§

The rain had lifted, but the sky remained heavy with clouds.

The carriage clattered along a road that ran straight as an arrow across the plain from the interior to the frontier, the east to the west.

Some went to trade. Others, to see their families. Others still, to escape them.

Some went as pioneers. Some were sad-looking types who might have been going into exile.

As was so often the case with shared carriages, expressions of joy and sorrow mingled freely.

Among those expressions, some might have noticed a few fellow passengers whose looks spoke of a job recently and finally finished. None, however, would have been likely to guess just what adventure those few had come from.

It didn't matter to anyone else, anyway.

Dragon slaying might have been interesting, but that was merely the stuff of legends, and no one would assume they had been attacked by a dragon.

That was how the job of adventuring often was.

"Mm… Ahh! That was fun…!"

High Elf Archer stretched away from the luggage she had been leaning against, trying to ease her stiff shoulders. Her long ears stood up happily, and she wore a relaxed expression.

Dwarf Shaman, who was sitting cross-legged and resting his chin in his hands, said irritably:

"Even the part where you were being mobbed by goblins and crying like a baby?"

"Well, we won that fight, didn't we? And here we are. And we got a reward to boot!" She hefted a leather pouch into her palm. The weight of it came from gold coins stuffed inside.

Not that the reward mattered very much to her. It was just a bonus.

"I must confess I feel a twinge of regret about that Gate mirror," Lizard Priest said, his tail coiled on the floor. He lapped his nose with his tongue as he flipped through a notebook of some kind. Before they had sunk the mirror, he had taken down as many notes about its unique properties as he could. "But we collected valuable information, smashed a heresy, and did valorous deeds. I am well more than satisfied."

"Won't hear any complaints from me, s'long as this gold gets me a good meal!"

"You dwarves—always thinking with your stomachs."

"Well, that's the biggest part of us, after all!"

The repartee between the archer and the shaman was as lively as ever.

Nearby, Priestess sat and watched them happily.

Is it over? I guess…

She did wonder who had been using the Gate to summon the goblin threat… But that was another story, one that had nothing to do with the adventure she and the others had just been on.

"……"

She glanced to the side.

He was there, squeezed up near the luggage and the curtain, still holding his sword and his helmeted head tilted toward the floor.

Shortly after the carriage had left the water town, he had drifted off to sleep.

"…Oh, well."

Priestess giggled and took a thin blanket out of her bag.

Would it really hurt him to take off his armor and helmet, at least when he was resting?

She gently draped the blanket around his shoulders, then sat next to him quietly. She folded her hands and set them on her knees, stretched her back, and laid her sounding staff down sideways.

True: He was Goblin Slayer. So there was no helping this.

So long as goblins were his enemies, he would not lower his guard for a moment.

That was why she hadn't tried to ask him anything. When he had returned from making his report to Sword Maiden, he had said only, "It's done."

And that was enough. Now that it was over, she had to let him rest.

"Oh?"

She noticed he was holding something else besides his sword.

A tiny birdcage—the canary.

The bird, like its owner, was asleep, eyes closed and perched on a branch.

It seemed he was properly feeding and taking care of the animal. Such attention to doing what was right seemed just like him.

"I wonder if he's given it a name yet."

She knew him. He would care diligently for it and probably never stop to think that it needed a name.

When they got back to the frontier town, when he woke up, she would have to be sure to ask him.

She could almost hear him: *Canary is good enough.*

"Hee-hee."

She reached out, careful not to wake him or the bird. In her slim fingers, she picked up a single feather the bird had dropped. She quietly pulled it between the bars of the cage, examining it in the light that filtered in through the curtain.

It shone a pale light green. Ever so gently, she set it in a crevice in his helmet.

The pale green feather looked a strange match for the grimy helm, but she didn't mind.

He wouldn't worry about this tiny touch of ostentation.

"You worked hard, Goblin Slayer, sir."

"When we get home…"

Suddenly, a voice drifted out from the helmet.

Priestess blinked several times, then pursed her lips and said, "Come on. If you're awake, then say so."

"I just woke up." His voice as he slowly sat up was a touch more mellow than usual.

Priestess did believe he had been sleeping, but she grumbled: “I can’t tell under that helmet.”

“I see.”

Goblin Slayer pulled a canteen from his bag and drank a mouthful, then two.

As usual, he drank through the visor of his helmet, suggesting he was ignoring her.

Or maybe he won’t understand if I don’t actually tell him to take the thing off.

He glanced at Priestess, who had set a finger to her lips in thought, and said:

“When we get home…” The same words as before. “There’s something I want to try.”

“What’s that?”

“An ice treat.”

“Oh…,” Priestess said with a knowing smile. Lizard Priest responded immediately:

“An ice treat! Could I perhaps join you in tasting this thing?”

“If you want some, I don’t mind,” Goblin Slayer said and, after a moment’s thought, added, “It’s made with milk.”

“Oh-ho! Sweet nectar!”

His tail uncoiled itself and slapped the floor of the carriage in ecstasy, drawing a concerned look through the curtain from the coachman.

“S-sorry, n-nothing to see here. Sorry about that!” Priestess quickly bowed her head to him and urged her companions to quiet down.

She put her hands on her chest and let out a breath. Thank goodness they hadn’t been told to get off the carriage.

Quite ignoring her, Dwarf Shaman gave a resounding laugh and pounded his belly.

“Ho, Beard-cutter! Planning to have a meal and not invite the dwarf?”

“Should I?”

“I surely think so!”

Goblin Slayer turned his helmet to the empty air and made a quiet sound, then nodded.

“In that case, please join us.”

Dwarf Shaman asked how he planned to make this ice treat, at which Goblin Slayer explained, miming with his hands. Lizard Priest held up a clawed finger to offer his idea, to which Goblin Slayer responded, “Then, we should…”

Goblin Slayer was normally reticent and getting him to open up was difficult. But…

“Gosh…”

…here now, he was clearly the center of attention.

The thought spread a pleasant warmth through Priestess’s small chest.

“Okay!” she resolved, raising her hand easily. “Goblin Slayer, sir, I can have some, too, can’t I?”

“I don’t mind.”

He doesn’t mind. She snickered and glanced at High Elf Archer.

High Elf Archer sat across from him, pointedly facing the other way, ears fluttering.

Although it was not necessarily a sign that he had noticed this, Goblin Slayer said:

“What about you?”

“…” Her ears jumped again. “Yeah. Gimme some, too.”

“I see,” Goblin Slayer said, then added sharply, “If it doesn’t come out well, don’t kick me.”

“Erk…”

Is he holding a grudge?

No, it couldn’t be. High Elf Archer gave a little snort.

Sure. Of course. He wasn’t the type to be bitter, even if an excitable elf had kicked him. Even if any normal person might have been upset.

After a time, High Elf Archer let out a long breath and shimmied around to face him.

“Yeah, fine. No kicking. So…please?”

“Yes.”

The steel helmet bobbed up and down once.

Priestess wondered when he would notice the light green feather in his helmet.

Maybe while they were still in the carriage, maybe after they got back to town, maybe not until the next time he took it off.

What would he do when he noticed? Would he be angry, or laugh, or perhaps pay it no mind?

High Elf Archer, ignorant of Priestess’s fond imaginings, narrowed her eyes like a cat.

“I don’t know that I’m all that fond of goblin slaying.”

She drew a circle in the air with her finger, long ears bouncing up and down.

They’d gone into some underground ruins to explore, been caught in a trap, and gotten out again. They had fought and defeated a bizarre monster and discovered a priceless artifact. They were all riding in this carriage together.

From the interior to the frontier. From the east to the west.

All so they could return home now that the adventure was over.

“…But it wasn’t so bad, I guess.”

Maybe she couldn’t quite bring herself to say exactly how she felt. The canary’s eyes fluttered open, and it chirped brightly.

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AFTERWORD

Hi, Kumo Kagyu here.

Thank you so much for getting a copy of *Goblin Slayer*, Volume 2.

I'm so grateful to all those who read and enjoyed the first volume. I never imagined my weird little adventurer, born from a moment's flippant conversation, would do so well for himself. It's thanks to all of you, who responded to him and his companions beyond anything I expected. I hope you'll continue to accompany him on his goblin-slaying adventures.

So. What did you think of Volume 2?

In this story, Goblin Slayer slayed all the goblins who showed up. Goblins. But where Volume 1 had several self-contained adventures, this was the story of one larger dungeon. The spice of any campaign is its dungeons—at least, in TRPGs. You and your friends forging through mazes, coming up with plans, fighting monsters, and finding treasure—is there anything better?

That's what was in my mind as I worked on this book; I thought I might as well write something I enjoyed. If you felt any measure of that pleasure or interest while reading, then I'll be thrilled.

Now comes the part where I apologize and also thank people.

First, to readers of the web versions of Volumes 1 and 2, thank you for your encouragement. I'll keep giving you my best, so I hope you'll stick with me.

To Mr. Noboru Kannatuki, who provided such lovely illustrations for the previous volume and now for this one, thank you! I'm one of those authors who dances for joy in front of his computer every time your pictures show up on my monitor.

To Mr. Kosuke Kurose, who's handling the manga version of the series, I so look forward to working with you. The comic version launches in *Big Gangan* the same month as this volume is being published. Incredible! Can't wait! Yahoo!

Thank you to all my creative friends and all my gaming friends; you keep me moving forward.

To my coordinator, editor, and everyone involved in getting this book to shelves: thank you so much!

And especially to yaruok, the admin on the site where I initially posted this story: You've been encouraging me ever since then. You were absolutely the link between that period and when I was finally published, and you have my unending gratitude.

To everyone I don't have space to name, who is supporting me from the wings—thank you all.

For Volume 3, I plan to detail the harvest festival at the frontier town.

In this story, Goblin Slayer will slay all the goblins who goblin, goblin.

I'll be giving everything I've got to make it something everyone will enjoy. See you there!

Kumo Kagyu

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